ForeWord Reviews

POETRY

Impenitent Notes
Baron Wormser
CavanKerry Press
978-1-933880-23-5
(March 2011)

"I'm here to recall what I never knew," writes Baron Wormser in "Abandoned Asylum, Northampton, Massachusetts," the final poem in this fine collection. While he may never have been there himself, Wormser's poetry successfully places the reader alongside a wide range of characters in a variety of predicaments: the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq, a stutterer, a man tortured in 1970s Chile. Wormser's own history appears as well, and the ruminations of an intelligent person in this age: how torture became so fascinating, or why hedge fund advisors make so darn much money. The worst of human nature is often present, though it may sound "very thin and far away, / Almost like music or a voice / With a broken windpipe."

Not everything is serious: ordinary joys—like be-bopping in the car to the radio—are here, too, and so is whimsy: Percy Bysshe Shelley shows up as a stoner with some "quality weed," and Babe Ruth advises Kid Rilke. The sometimes odd sources of comfort are a recurrent theme.

These poems are easy to slip into and enjoy. What takes more time to soak in is Wormser's astonishing ability to imagine another's experience, and his masterful use of language. He weaves a wabi-sabi garment here—not shabby, but of subtle tones, the kind of fabric that forces one to notice texture, the fine and subtle threads of warp and weft.

The former poet laureate of Maine, Wormser is the author of ten books of poetry and prose, and co-author of two books about teaching poetry, including A Surge of Language: Teaching Poetry Day by Day, an exceptional resource for educators.

What most stands out in this collection, however, is Wormser's willingness to accompany humans into difficulty. "Eve Dying" considers a story heretofore passed over too quickly: Eve, the first woman, is also the first woman to experience death. And through Eve, the reader remembers that we all will face death for the first and only time.

Aware of language's limitations in fully capturing the "jeweled moment," Wormser nevertheless persists, and in this unadorned voice is the kind of empathy most needed for these times: intelligent and unafraid. Like Whitman in "For His Part: Walt Whitman (1863),"

Wormser is the poet who “voyaged / to the edge of human warmth and held the hand / as it turned cold. That was the poem the poet had always known / and from which he never turned away.”

Teresa Scollon