

In Natural Light

Michael Anania

Asphodel Press (Feb 12, 1999)

Unknown \$14.95 (91pp)

978-1-55921-270-0

The cover page of this elegantly presented volume describes Michael Anania's poetic territory as the Midwestern plains and the Chicago cityscape. The territory is, however, equally if not more about jazzmen and German expressionists, American and European poets and a cast of purely personal acquaintances; the landscape is there to keep us oriented.

Anania's free verse is highly designed. He uses verbal and visual devices to unify it into clear and attractive shapes. For example, each stanza of "What Are Islands To Me Now" begins with the word or phrase that ended the last one. Many of these poems play changes on art or music or other poems, and most are dedicated to—or "after"—someone or something. Some of Anania's subjects and honorees are familiar, some vaguely familiar and others completely unfamiliar to the reader. This stream of overt and covert references may create an inside/outside dichotomy: readers who do not recognize a reference may feel that they were prevented from understanding the poem in its entirety. This is nonsense, of course—while running to the arcane, the poet's dedications and titles should not stand as a barrier to understanding what are, for the most part, accessible and straightforward lyrics.

Anania draws on a personal canon of art and literature that is staggeringly broad. He understands prosody—the poetic infrastructure—and tells us so in "Fifty-two Definite Articles," while paying a little court to Pindar, Koch, Whitman, Homer, Constable, Dove, Spenser, Still, Wittgenstein and Michelangelo (to cite the obvious allusions, and leave out the more subtle ones). He also makes a few low-level puns. It is possible he would be a terror at a cocktail party; it is equally possible that he would be a lot of fun.

LAURENE SORENSEN (March / April 1999)

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