FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Luster
Don Bogen
Wesleyan University Press
978-0-8195-6649-2
(November 3, 2003)

Yusef Komunyakaa once wrote: “Don’t write what you know; write what you’re willing to discover.” This thought, coupled with Williams’s famous “No ideas but in things,” prepares readers to experience this poet. Bogen divided this book into five parts, which find their overwhelming tension between the inadequacies of man and language and the functions they are meant to perform.

The author of two other books of poetry, After the Splendid Display and The Known World as well as a critical work, A Necessary Order: Theodore Roethke and the Writing Process, Bogen teaches at the University of Cincinnati. In this collection, he begins with objects and animals-thoroughbreds, card catalogs, bullhorns. He sloughs off expectation in favor of discovery, and his subjects become unexpected sites of poetry. He describes a bullhorn: “A gun / for the mouth,” and “the dry slap / of authority / claimed from a distance,” and “a half-displayed threat / of force, like / a robot / speaking through / the grille of a truck.”

In the next section, Bogen begins to explore cadence and language, linking cultures to the movement of their language, and that movement to the relative dislocation of the speaker. Here, Bogen engages the words of poets past-Rilke, Coleridge, perhaps even a hint of Baudelaire or Montale-in his long sequence of poems, “Etudes.” The third section invokes memory from the sixties, a time when the speaker’s “life was a tissue of ‘if’s. Its progress depended / on scholarships, on what I thought you might do or say, / on a lottery of birthdates.” This middle section, based largely on two longer narrative poems, juxtaposes warmongering with uncertainty and a timid peace, both now and forty years ago. Rich with historical detail, the section suggests that if language fails in the beginning of the book, it is man who fails here.

Section four chronicles what might redeem man and nature, and man’s attempt to match nature, or reconstruct it in the artifice of language. The poems endeavor to articulate the sublimity of nature, both its threat and its beauty. The book culminates in the fifth section, where Bogen creates machines, more objects of artifice created by humankind, which may eventually consume us. He elicits a warning taken loosely from The Time Machine: “the grimy

engines of labor deep in the underworld / boom a rhythmic warning to the bored / and child-like creatures of the surface, who have become / so exquisitely refined they can no longer tell what it means."

Bogen suggests that our ease may come at too high a price, that our reliance on that which is constructed-language, machines, war-may eventually destroy us, while language, nature, and human curiosity might save us.

Camille-Yvette Welsch