Clarion Review

Poetry

Mockingbird Come Home
Stephen B. Wiley
Oasis Publishers
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Four Stars (out of Five)

O public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you, you express me better than I can express myself.

—Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," from *Leaves of Grass* (1892)

This reverence of grace in the twilight years coalesces around themes of remembrance, death, and nature. *Mockingbird Come Home* features foundations of homesteads otherwise reclaimed by the Earth, and acceptance of the downward slope late in life. Subjects are those leaving the planet shortly, and pastoral existence lately gone by the wayside, as in "Fern Lodge": "testing the edge of the old bridle path / still barren from the pounding of hooves / though no horse had been by for fifty years."

The locales visited are rural and once-rural corners of New Jersey and Vermont, with a sprinkling of Key West, the hideout of the intentionally anonymous. The focus isn't on wistful nostalgia for what's lost, the mood is uncomplicated delight in that which remains. Nature provides both metaphors and objects of enduring reference, as in "Double Blooming Cherry Tree": "my cherry tree in bloom again / even more striking for the singularity / as the leaves are falling."

Lighter poems elevate subtle marvels or point out the challenge of settling on perfectly apt descriptions, as in "Words Are Like Pi." Soon though it is back to critical bedside vigils, for an elderly father, for an injured friend. In "Hospice," the menace is only steps away: "Death was catching its breath in the hall." Typically Wiley's finishing lines hold the most poignant phrases. The book's closer, "Last Words" boils out every non-crucial impurity and leaves a beautifully simple ten words which would serve anyone honorably at the end of life: "You were great / I love you / Will you forgive me."

The New Jersey poet was a practicing lawyer. He did time in the State Senate, and

served as the Governor's counsel. Fifteen poems of these fifty-six previously appeared in such literary outlets as *Mobius* and *Writers' Journal*. The layout uses an experimental approach which handicaps pieces of the third section, "Poems on Poetry," by scattering them as occasional facing-page foils to poems from the other two, "Where We Live" and "Who We Are." A little more than half the facing pages are blank, presenting the problem of aesthetic asymmetry. The entire element of punctuation is omitted as a style choice, but regular rhythms and logical line breaks minimize the hankering for absent commas.

Mockingbird Come Home speaks with marked appreciation for what has been. It advises by example a complaint-free glide from the October-something of life to the inevitable, natural conclusion. Stephen B. Wiley isn't finished yet, but he's back to quiet essentials and his goodbye wave exhibits championship form. A formidable successor to *Hero Island* (2005), this collection offers a stripped-down, contagious calmness, an organic fatalism above any egoistic fear of mortality.