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Clarion Review ★★★★½ POETRY

Seeking the Hook

Lou Lipsitz
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After an absence of thirty-odd years, Lou Lipsitz makes his return to poetry, offering highlights from his first two books as well as two volumes of new poems which trace the maturation of the poet as a man and a writer. The selections from the original two books dazzle with unexpected metaphors carried well past their logical ends and surreal turns slyly executed at exactly the right moment. The later two volumes lack the bite of their predecessors, but the newer, more mellow poems still reveal work rich with figurative language, fresh in subject matter, and strong in voice.

During his long hiatus from publishing poetry books, Lipsitz taught political science at the University of North Carolina and has since become a practicing psychotherapist interested in men's issues. Not surprisingly, he counts Robert Bly among his influences. Certainly his leap to sudden awareness in particular poems harkens to that influence, as does his continued interest in relationships between men, which finds voice in poems about his son, his father, himself, and his romantic relationships.

The book begins with the newer poems, reintroducing the poet's voice with "Seeking the Hook," almost a male answer to Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," except in Lipsitz' version of things he chases the hook and allows himself to be caught and consumed. Consumption becomes a prevalent theme in the first section as the poet becomes both sustenance and hunger simultaneously; both contentment and restlessness. In "The Grief," he writes, "Now's the moment though when I want to buy time / but they won't take my money." This imbalance creates the tension that drives the first section as the poet ponders how to live with the dichotomy.

In the second part of the book, the poems focus more closely on the cyclical nature of male relationships, being young son and then aging, apologetic father. These poems possess a stronger narrative thread, such that they work as a volume within a volume as Lipsitz makes sense of the relationships that shaped his life. Of his father, he writes, "A man of the belly, they would have said, / giving over his life unto earthly pleasures, / unto suntan and games of chanceÂ…" After walking out on his son twenty years before, he writes of seeing his child emerge from a tunnel at the airport, unable or unwilling to recognize his father, and sees in this moment all the betrayal that has passed between them. He has a gift for finding the telling moment.

Ultimately, the new poems are strong and accomplished, and the older works retain their fresh strange edge, making them as exciting today as they were three decades ago.

(February 26, 2010)

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