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Subway Stops: Collected Poems of Abnorman

Abnorman
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In his introduction to this slim but feisty volume of poetry by Norman Nichols (d. 1995), who wrote under the pen name Abnorman, David Williams maps Nichols's poetic territory: "leather sex, heavy drug trips, orgiastic nights, high powered rushes, assorted degradations and tinges of madness." This is, by and large, accurate. More accurate still is Nichols' own summary: "It's all required learning/ and acquired lust./ 6 + 6 + 6 equals hedonistic calculus." ("Exhale")

A native of Louisville, Kentucky, Nichols moved to San Francisco in 1981 and immersed himself in the Castro's bar scene. In 1990, he returned to Louisville, and was diagnosed HIV-positive later that year. According to the introduction, he wrote some of his poems on bathroom walls—to mixed, spontaneous reviews—as well as in more conventional places. (Many of the poems collected here were published in two Louisville periodicals during Nichols' lifetime.)

Bearing out the title metaphor, this book is divided into two sections or levels, with sunnier, more traditional and whimsical works on the "upper level" and darker, sex- and drug-themed poems on the lower level. Some of Nichols' lighter work is barely more than greeting-card verse, with the standard end-rhymes of a Top 40 lyric: "I miss you Vicki. Time goes/ by so fast and then when I go/ to remember sometimes things/ seem so long ago." ("Where the Hell Is Vickie?")

Like a subway system, there is much more going on in this book below ground than at street level. High-risk behavior is catalogued here in (mostly) joyous detail. There are frequent references to intravenous needles, or "points," expertly witnessed sex acts, and enough swear words to fill a school bus. Nichols is a merry punster, and the double entendre is his favorite literary device, though there are lots of single entendres, too.

Like most folk lyrics, these poems rhyme, more or less, although Nichols was not overly concerned about tight prosody. The raw sounds of words are paramount here, which is why something like "Toilet Bowl Blues" is such a nifty performance piece: "I know what I'm talkin' about,/ and I know you all do too./ Hey, it's the pits/ when you gots the shits,/ just sittin' and shittin',/ toilet bowl blues." This poetry begs to be read aloud, and not by the shy.
LAURENE SORENSEN (January / February 1999)

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