

The Man Who Loves Cezanne

Dabney Stuart

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Poetry has been around longer than history, so it's difficult to find, or even imagine, a new theme for this old impulse. In every book of poetry by a single author, the individual pieces will speak of love, nature, faith, childhood-any number of variations on the common experiences of human life. What makes the presentation different in this new book of poems is maturity of both voice and vision.

Winner of such prizes as a Guggenheim and two literary fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and gainer of two university chairs as Poet in Residence, this poet has forty and more years of experience in the literary world, which has endowed him with a voice of not only experience but authority. It's a delight to encounter a lyric poet who is also a scholar, who is intrepid enough to bandy about the names and forms of poetry's darlings.

From "Free Will" (already a lip-licking pun), for instance: "William Shakespeare was / born in a ripe apple / in a seasonable month / when marmalade was dear / at any price for milady's / biscuit" to the lightly-crafted pantoum, "A Shadow They Cast" which begins: "The boy, an old man now, remembers / his grandfather sitting in the rowboat, / a silhouette against the treeline, / his head and torso a flecked hollowness" and ends: "His grandfather, himself, a shadow they cast, / a silhouette against the treeline, / become the answers memory composes. / The boy, an old man now, remembers." This poetry flows from a quill dipped into the inkwell of our common memory and sharpened on the grindstone of serious inquiry into the history of language and its arts.

Since the title poem, "The Man Who Loves Cezanne," is written in the first person, apparently it is Stuart himself who loves that artist, whose work he delicately and incisively describes. However, throughout the widely varied selections, he proves that he also loves travel, reading, family, and not least the content and quality of his own memory, which he is able to grasp in chunks as malleable as modeling clay and turn into new forms, new ideas, new perceptions.

There's something wonderful about how an eye that has seen it all can use old words to form new images. That's the most outstanding virtue of this new collection: emotions that, in a young poet, have a tendency to slop over into the sentimental can emerge upon reflection as poems that combine passion and serenity to forge symbols proving the eternity of the human spirit.

SANDY MCKINNEY (January / February 2004)

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