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The Salt Hour

J.P. White

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Abundant with beaches, sails, and spray, these
poems celebrate both the seductiveness and the destructive power of the sea, letting the fact of its unpredictability become a metaphor for human behavior. “The future has its limit, but the past, / what end?” the poet muses in “Breakwall Cats,” a poem that pairs White’s love of the ocean with his curiosity about family members whose lives-like the cats of the poem’s title-have “hiding places few have ever seen.”

On a grand scale, White ponders German complicity in the Holocaust: “Apple Trees in the Black Forest” recounts how a European visit and memories of his own German grandmother complicate his thoughts about that evil. More personally, a number of poems explore a man’s (or boy’s) inability to understand women while remaining in thrall to them. A nostalgic tone prevails as White plumbs multiple limitless pasts-his own, of course, but also, collectively, the readers’.

Many poets ground themselves in a landscape; it must follow that a poet devoted to oceans finds himself, picaresquely, all over the world-Greece, the Caribbean, Hawaii, England, New York, Florida-but White gives particular attention to Russia. In “April at the Mouth of the Russian River,” a couple in California talks of the child in a Russian orphanage they are soon to adopt; in “On the Night Train to Nizhni,” they are traveling towards her: “one girl / In an orphanage in a blue babushka, whose photo we clutch / Like an icon lit in the window of a one-flap wallet.”

“Russian Daughter” and “The Palette of Eternity” present the poet’s meditations on the adopted girl’s possible past (“daughter of the Volga and Oka Rivers, / where once the Nizhni-Novgorod fair / blended all the dialects of Russia and Asia”), as well as on the future that may bring her questions about her ancestry. The final image of this child running on the beach brings readers full circle from the book’s early evocations of family sailing trips recounted from a young boy’s point of view.

JANET HOLMES (September / October 2001)

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