

The Sky and the Sea: Poetry and Prose

Kevin J. Johnson

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Johnson's intriguing collection is firmly rooted in everyday life.

In *The Sky and the Sea*, Kevin J. Johnson brings together poems and prose that inhabit both the mundane and the fantastic. The result is a collection that intrigues in its unevenness—in its reaching upward and outward while remaining firmly planted in everyday life.

Johnson, a native of Wisconsin, divides his book into three sections—"Words from Superior," "Words from Eau Claire," and "Words from Home"—with poems seemingly divided by the location in which they were crafted. Serving as the speaker in the majority of the book's poems, Johnson comes across as honest, earnest, and inquisitive. The intent and voice of the poet are clearly expressed in the straightforward organization of the pieces themselves, as well as in the introduction, acknowledgments, and footnotes. This clarity, however, can leave little room for interpretation and resonance.

Pieces with bodies of water as subject matter lend Johnson's collection a mysterious tone. The poems "Stepping out" and "Neptune's Hand: Ode to Elaine Morgan" and the prose piece "Evolution" explore the Aquatic Ape Theory—which posits that human ancestors were, at one time, adapted to a semi-aquatic existence—and blend reality, fantasy, and possibility. These moments are juxtaposed nicely with the ordinary—with the "golden memory" of a tree on a river's shore, with traveling "the perilous / terrain of existence, // Pausing only to stuff / French fries in our mouths."

However, a good number of the poems are dulled by predictable rhyme schemes. Lines from "IMperfect" read, "As if words were the answer / the answer to all, / when they're really like trying / to paint squares on a ball." Similarly, in "Traditions Past," the poet writes, "Letting go of traditions past, / We come to a new conclusion, / Only to realize, at long last, / We've found no better solution." When combined with works like "A Poem to the Sea," which is written almost entirely in questions, and "The 10:00 P.M. News," which whittles down the content of the nightly news into a few words, the collection takes on an underdeveloped quality that gives it the feel of a young poet's journal.

That said, several of the poems are truly striking. "In Library Flight" includes the lines, "Miniature suns / suspended on metal stalks / bathe the sidewalk orange, / and hum along with the sound of the river." "The Rat's Star," a poem for Anne Sexton, reads, "What desperate hours claimed you? / Huddled guilt in ceramic corners. // Children marching off to school, / while furies shrieked for home." Such gorgeous imagery is affecting and evocative, and it urges faith in Johnson's poetic sensibilities.

A variety of poem lengths adds interest. The four consecutive short pieces in the first section bring energy and momentum to the beginning of the collection, and “Floating on Ashes and Cinders” and “Tree Climber,” which play with line breaks, challenge the cadence and appearance of Johnson’s more traditionally rhymed and formatted poems. There are a few typos scattered throughout: an incorrectly used semicolon in the introduction; the phrase “while in under his supervision” in the acknowledgments; and rooms that should be “abandoned” as opposed to “abandon.”

In lines like “The trout and tadpoles / flicker in time, / just one more / of the earth’s exhalations,” Johnson’s potential for growth as a poet is obvious. Continued refinement of the language and rhythm of the poems in this debut collection would bring them into fuller maturity.

MARGARET FEDDER (March 12, 2014)

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