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Traffic: New and Selected Poems

Jack Anderson
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The prose poem, like bluegrass music, is one of those “minor” forms that continue to thrive, thanks to a few skilled practitioners and a relatively small but faithful audience. With Traffic, his eighth book of poems, Anderson stakes a strong claim to a place in whatever heaven there may be for prose poets.

Written over almost 30 years, the pieces gathered in this beautifully produced collection are naturally somewhat uneven. “Sincere Poet,” for instance, slips into an odd self-righteousness-who but a poet or Oscar Wilde would attack sincerity? Anyway, Wilde did it better.

But when Anderson is on, he is charming, fascinating and mysterious. I found myself thinking of Russell Edson, Italo Calvino, even Kafka—august company, but Anderson has a similar knack for the weird, slightly off-center, quirkily fabulous story. Consider the opening of “Calamitous Dreams”: “He dreamed the old woman he had jeered at in the street took off all his clothes and wrapped him in a squirrelskin. Then he was set among the other squirrels and guinea pigs who were very well mannered and waited on the old woman….” The book contains many of these small, elegant, unpredictable narratives, not nearly all in this fairy-tale vein; another favorite is simply called “Bartenders.”

Expansive enough to give their narratives breathing room, their images weight and substance, these poems are hard to quote effectively in a brief review. I can only say that they entangle the worlds of sleep and waking, mystery and plain fact, rumor and history, in truly original and entrancing ways. “The Mysterious Barricades;” or, “The Enchanments [sic] of Memory” manage to involve Couperin’s piece by that name, the Russian ballet, and bandits who highjack a carriage just to see the great ballerina Taglioni dance-all of this in three pages. This and a half-dozen other poems from this book will haunt me for a long time, and I am grateful for the haunting.
JEFF GUNDY (December 16, 1998)

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