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Poetry

Walking With Ruskin: Poems
Robert Cording
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A good poem, it seems, is a delicately, perfectly crafted lie: a thin thread that coils around itself, telling a story that relates both to itself and to the world it knows we must believe in. A good poem leads us down a trail through the woods, pointing out the cardinal and the budding dogwood, and asks us to overlook (just for a moment) the housing development that will leave deep scars in the mud, gouge the earth, remove the trees. Robert Cording's newest collection of poems, *Walking With Ruskin*, is a jewelry box of these moments, offering the reader images of peace, "the birds that sing from the eaves / the seizing cold that sounds the rafters."

A distinguished poet with five published collections, Cording is also the Barrett Professor of Creative Writing at College of the Holy Cross in Connecticut. His poems, consequently, are neither naïve nor cluttered; he acknowledges his predecessors, then finds his own way through an oh-so-familiar landscape of New England woods, ponds, and houses. It's territory trodden by writers like Frost, Dickinson, Wordsworth, and, of course, Ruskin, but Cording makes these images his own. He references without imitation, layering of his words with the shed sticks of poems we've read before. The result is poems that burst with life, three-dimensional poems that move forwards and backwards in time and literature. "Let her eyes, / blinded for so long by grief, see again / what is just outside her window: / a red and white clownish woodpecker, / two nuthatches spiraling head first / down a tree, the neighbor in her / nightgown who holds out her hands / with five different kinds of seed." Each poem is rich with tradition even as it claims its own place.

Cording's poetry is fearless in his choice of subject. Rather than write quiet, domestic works, he expands each poem to effortlessly encompass themes of death, grief, God, and love. Yet there is nothing bombastic about *Walking With Ruskin*: the lines are tightly crafted, and each word placed with a master's knowing hand. Cording knows the power of the perfectly delivered phrase, and he moves the reader through a poem with simple conviction. "And because I like the

mystery of an old truck / that suddenly appears in the middle / of these roadless, second-growth woods, / a maple sapling growing from the windshield, / its backseat a storehouse for nuts, / a chickadee bathing on its caved-in roof." An abandoned truck has the same weight as a dead child, a squashed snake the same as the daily devotions of a poet.

Finding the moments of reverence in the measure of an ordinary day, *Walking With Ruskin* is a lovely collection from acclaimed poet Robert Cording. Thoughtful and excellently crafted poems travel the familiar footpaths of New England, keeping company with the great writers that have gone before them even as they break new ground, finding the secret clearings in the quiet of the human heart.

Claire Rudy Foster