ForeWord Reviews

We Bed Down Into Water
John Rybicki
Northwestern University Press
978-0-8101-5187-1
(Jan 8, 2008)

These poems reach into the throat and down through the bowels to the center of the earth, from where they pull up stones and wind and water, and blood and tears and wonder. They posit eloquently that the most worthwhile element of the human condition is the heart.

This poet's heart is expansive, opening to embrace the entirety of the human experience—all the awe, joy, pain, and sorrow of being alive. This is Rybicki's third collection, following *Traveling at High Speeds* and *Yellow-Haired Girl with Spider*. An associate professor of English and writer-in-residence at Alma College, he also conducts creative writing workshops for children who have endured trauma or loss, a subject he knows well. These autobiographical poems treat mostly of Rybicki's wife's illness, and their adoption of an inner-city boy.

A strong theme among the poems is the unwavering love between the poet and his cancer-stricken wife, Julie Moulds, who says "Even our skeletons are in love," at the beginning of the poem called "Not Knowing Enough About Physics to Write This Poem." Rybicki says: "Sometimes I leave my lips on her / belly in one spot for days, / because I'm terrified the ways / she might vanish, flesh like some trick hankie / yanked suddenly into heaven."

About their son, he writes in "Three Lanterns": "We take the scent that falls from him— / baby powder, gunpowder— // into our skulls because we live / in an empty house, // and in each bedroom there's a bell / ringing under the covers // where a child might live."

Rybicki does not shy away from the horrors of fighting cancer, and courageously faces death, yet he never loses sight of hope, never lets go of joy. In "Her Body Like a Lantern Next to Me," he cries: "There's nothing poetic about this. / I have one oar that hangs // from our bedroom window, / and I am rowing our hut / in the same desperate circle."

In "Outside the Bone Marrow Unit," he reaches for hope: "I stand on my toes and kiss one of my angels, / and in that kiss beg her // to take a stiff broom to this talk: / sweep the cancer back across the heavens; // please don't miss one crumb of it. Sweep / the cancer back into its black box of oblivion."

These raw, incandescent poems are both earthy and heartening; the poet has spilled his heart on the page, and the reader may absorb the drops and be enhanced.

Karen McCarthy