


6-20-2014

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Recommended Citation

Shepherd, Kelly Dean (2014) "Everything, Now by Jessica Moore and Birds, Metals, Stones & Rain by Russell Thornton," *The Goose*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss1/11>

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Songs of Sparrows, Earth & Spirits

Everything, Now by JESSICA MOORE

Brick Books, 2012 \$19.00

Birds, Metals, Stones & Rain by RUSSELL THORNTON

Harbour Publishing, 2013 \$16.95

Reviewed by KELLY DEAN SHEPHERD

From the front cover's graceful and evocative linocut, to the Afterword which is both artist statement and heartfelt confession, Jessica Moore's *Everything, Now* is a beautiful book. When Moore's lover Galen was killed in a bicycle accident, she was unable to write about it; she was resistant to the idea that something could be created from the loss. She was initially afraid that poetry might reduce the terrible and sacred wholeness of the experience, but ultimately concluded that "nothing could diminish it" and in fact the writing had to be done.

This hesitation, this cautious tension, is evident in the poems. Moore combines dense prose with brief, terse lines and compelling black & white photography to weave a haunting tapestry sometimes rich and colorful, sometimes bleak and elusive. Thematically, we are moved from the depiction of cold, clear detachment in "Glass like me": "For a year I was like glass – poised to shatter" to the acceptance and forgiveness of "North Beach":

Love, tonight, at the edge of this

sea of stars, I don't need words. All there is

is here – a light from the beginning of the world

and this warm knowing, in us and all around us,

stars tingling through our blood – it is us, our edges erased, love,

tonight, I am,
we are, full.

. . . and back again. Some poems, like "San Cristobal," are spacious and sun-drenched, full of prayer flags and vines growing outside windows; others, like the title piece "Everything, now," fill the page to overflowing with long lines, descriptions of dreams entangled with personal myths and unfulfilled desires. Some of these poems seem to be almost haunted by the personifications of memories and unanswerable questions.

Indeed, among other things, *Everything, Now* is a book about spirits. They flutter in the background of almost every line: on birds' wings, in and out of bright rooms, in the held breath. There are dark spirits, too, including the mysterious "Something" that crouches in shadows and hollow places, and the skeletal red devil (who is death), who follows and torments the poet. Ghosts, and beings of pure light, and questions about the human soul move throughout the book. "Tonight as I write," Moore says in the opening poem, "I become conjurer – / when I open my hands: / a thousand sparrows." This is her magic: summoning the words, the pain, the spirits—the thousand sparrows—and then releasing them.

* * *

Perhaps a quick, summary glance at Russell Thornton's new collection will give us some hints, some clues as to what we can expect from the poems. With a book

entitled *Birds, Metals, Stones & Rain*, we might be forgiven for expecting simple nature poetry. The table of contents contains a number of elemental-sounding titles like “Squall,” “Rain Wolf, West Coast Trail,” and “Book of Sparrows,” which seem to confirm this suspicion. We also see references to flowers, snow, cormorants, and swans’ bones.

Looking a little closer at the titles, however, there appears to be a second grouping of poems. These seem to deal with the poet’s family. Considering one called “My Grandmother’s Eyes”—and two titles starting with the words “My Daughter”—this is beginning to look almost predictable.

Fortunately, poetry invites more than a quick, summary glance.

Certainly, there are poems about family here. Some describe Thornton’s daughter, for example the poem “Triangle” compares his vision of the world with hers. The cry of a gull comprises one point of the little girl’s perceptual “triangle,” her father the second, and she herself the third. He, on the other hand, defines his own triangle as “her, the world, and my dead / among the dead.”

And *Birds, Metals, Stones & Rain* has elemental themes, too: poems dealing with wildlife, bodies of water, and geology. There are boulders “dating back to a mere three hundred / million years after the globe formed / out of a cloud of cosmic debris and dust.” Branches in the rain resemble molten metal, transforming a tree into the burning bush from the biblical book of Exodus; a giant purple-black crow “utters” an abusive father. Not merely nature poems, these are mythical readings of the natural world. In the poem “Greenness” there are lawns of grass that, Thornton says,

touch my bare
feet with cold dew and make me
swift, shoot me
full of starlight the grass stores in its
maze
of roots and make me shine bright.

This is reminiscent of the *duende* that, according to Federico Garcia Lorca, surges up from the earth and into the soles of one’s feet: a chthonic energy. It is significant that this poem takes us underground, to the labyrinthine roots of the grass, because that is where much of this book dwells: in rocks, under water, in the sand and soil. Some (arguably, most) of these poems are mythical, but Thornton is not creating a grand personal cosmology by looking at the heavens. Addressing “The Man Who Sleeps in Cemeteries” he says: “Whistle all day the songs / that came to you in the night through the cold clean dirt.” The man in the poem learns his music by resting his head upon the earth, which is inhabited by the deceased. After reading *Birds, Metals, Stones & Rain*, this is exactly how I would describe Russell Thornton.

KELLY DEAN SHEPHERD has an MA in Religious Studies from the University of Alberta, and is currently working on an MFA in creative writing at UBC Okanagan. He is also a poetry editor for *The Trumpeter*, an online environmental journal. Kelly has written three poetry chapbooks, and his poetry and nonfiction have appeared in *Geist, Lake*, and numerous other Canadian and international publications.