



Out of Town

by Lex Runciman
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help the reader explore the overlooked avenues of daily existence, and the lyricism of the common—no easy task. Yet what greater gift could a poet offer than a reminder that even our mundane moments are worthy of wonder and filled with the singular grace of living?

The poems in Lex Runciman's latest collection, *Out of Town*, are filled with such gifts. Once a student of Hugo's in the University of Montana's writing program, Runciman's poems reflect the sensibility of someone who has lived life purposefully--that purpose being to pay attention, ask questions, and revel in the continuous thread between the past and present. There is a gentle, measured pace to the poems, one that reflects Runciman's approach to writing: "I'm not eager to be finished with a poem; let it take an unhurried and provocative year or two." Unhurried, to be sure: it's been fifteen years since Runciman's last book of poetry, *The Admirations*, won the Oregon Book Award.

In "One Thing," the first poem in *Out of Town*, Runciman chooses to begin at the very beginning—before the Fall of Adam and Eve. Eden is a fitting opening for a collection that moves easily between the innocence of childhood, the richness of parenting, and the beauty of nature. The opening stanza celebrates the oneness of the living world before the discovery of knowledge and sin: "In the garden / Before everything fell into its separateness, / Before everything fell apart, / The mute and noisy world sang—it was one thing— / And we had no need, no need for speech."

Mourning the loss of wholeness, the poet wistfully concludes that, "we had to learn to speak to learn / How clumsy we had become." Yet this wistfulness is more complex than a mere yearning for perfection; if anything, it is an unhesitating acceptance of the elemental struggle of knowing how inadequate we humans are for the task of perfection.

This theme recurs throughout the collection, but particularly so in many of the poems about his two daughters, reflecting a peculiar balance between guidance and helplessness that is likely to resonate with any parent. This

Richard Hugo once wrote: "never write a poem about anything that ought to have a poem written about it." He urged the poet to tension is clearest in "Arrowood House," where the poet is teaching one of his daughters to ride a bike: "Running along, I can tell / what needs to click at the center of balance / is for you only envy, will, a trust / in mystery, in what you cannot find. We try / again, again, again, until you're fighting tears. / I can no more do this for you than fly."

Though these poems are intimate and personal, they do not fail to include the wider world in their scope. Recalling the working-class men of the Willamette Valley in Oregon, where Runciman grew up and lives today, "Like Men" captures the bittersweet experience of families in the post-war era, whose fathers discovered the price of providing a better life for their children was often alienation. "The paycheck—never enough—was proof / of love, that word they could not quite / get in their mouths. They saved / for education for their children, who / if successful, they did not understand, who/ thinking of them, wished them ease/ and thanksgiving, and thought pity."

Poems such as "Green," "The Moon," and "Day Litany" rely on a steady flow of imagery rich with color and texture to draw the reader into the natural world. They are a sacramental testimony to the beautiful intricacies of landscape, "whatever it means." But "The Waiting," a poem set in the languid heat of late summer, pulls against the peace of the pastoral vision. Not content to merely observe, the poet wonders what it would be like to be reunited with the world of Eden: "If we could say the name, the perfect sounds / for ground we love. That, and the common litany— / how this becomes mango / and bird of paradise, cocoa bean, skunk cabbage. / If we could say why. /...If we could rouse and tease the dead / of ourselves unborn. / But we are not met." The reader feels abandoned by a higher power—the one who could undo the Fall and reunite all living creatures. But the loss is mitigated by the revelation that the poet is not alone as he muses. Someone sits next to him watching the twilight fall, talking, a comforting salve to the loneliness of being a creature of language.

This is a book to leave sitting on the breakfast table for weeks at a time, readily available as an alternative or antidote to the newspaper. The poems pull the reader into the poet's life without forcing them to leave their own world, serving as a reminder that every life harbors poetry, and even the unanswerable questions are well worth asking. "Out of Town" is the third book in Cloudbank Books Northwest Poetry Series.

Reviewed by
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Hyzy