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How It Seems To Me

New & Selected Poems

By Phil Hey

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“I want to talk about things I love,” begins Phil Hey’s poem “At the river’s edge,” but this line might speak for all the work here. For these are love poems, not in the man-woman sense (though you’ll find some of those as well), but in that these poems make a place (a star-filled night, a green field, a known house) where what is loved is brought to be saved, even if (perhaps especially if) it cannot find any other way to survive in this world.

Like the daylilies that still linger at a farm whose inhabitants are long since gone away (“And yet out front, year in, year out, those lilies come again”), Hey’s poems remind us of life’s brevity even as they console us with its persistent beauty. In the understated, yet harrowing “Farm Sale,” one man’s days, a family farm, a way of life are swallowed up by the world and time, sunlight the only scar to mark the spot where it all took place and the earth healed over in just the passage of an afternoon:

All done. By three o’clock all you see
is a yard full of bootmarks,
the bank man gone with the money,
the auctioneer storing his chant
in the silence of his throat,
the sun just breaking through.

These poems ache for other lives, a quality in somewhat short supply these days, when poets seem to weep for themselves alone, if they weep at all. And as the one from home who speaks the language of the wider world, Hey doesn’t shrink before his self-imposed duty to translate. And so, after the fair is over or the field work done, he goes home and writes a poem, one of the hardest kind to write, the poem of the inarticulate neighbor or friend who feels his own life as deeply as Hey does, but could never in a million years find the words to express it.

The highest compliment I can give these poems is that I think the people who are their focus, after they got over their initial shyness and their surprise that anyone would find their lives a fit subject for poetry, would be pleased to have their silences articulated with such tender accuracy, with such respect for their everyday courage, with so much modest and thoroughly decent Midwestern love. *How It Seems To Me* is not your typical “nice words, but so what?” book. Life matters here. Every transcendent, mud-caked moment of

it. And the stakes are very high: all we are or have a chance to become before we leave this world, and what, if anything, we leave behind.

— Ann Stapleton