

**Time Passes But Nothing is Lost:
A Commentary on Rick Belden's *Iron Man Family Outing***

by Elaine Palm
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What strikes me first in these poems is the unrelenting tension between sensory experience and a simultaneous search for spiritual transcendence. Image and idea entwine on every page, sometimes in grotesque acts of excess, sometimes in the pathos of a momentary child-like insight. Diametrically opposed forces of “thinking” and “sensing”, spurred by love withheld, take the writer on a journey to ultimate affirmation of the totality of his existence--mind, body and soul.

Strongly rendered vignettes draw in the reader via the senses—the sound of the fly swatter, the pain of the broken leg, the vision of the curve of the girl’s back, the taste of the dry creek bed, the smell of comic book life. It all works. And it all strikes complex chords of cacophony and beauty—sadness and pathos, titillation that borders on voyeurism, an evocation of a lost childhood. Every scene, every word is intense. Yet that’s only the beginning of the complexity of this piece. It’s the hook that draws the reader to the end of the dock, and says “now you need to jump in”.

What’s really at the heart of these poems is a reflexive life process, a process that turns on itself over and over, only inching forward in little steps of hope. The reach for the sacred, the fall to the profane, the desire for wholeness, the descent into dissociated sensory compulsion. The poems become a strange tumbleweed of recursive, yet ultimately forward, movement, where “visions of crashing through the guardrails interfere with carefully planned progress.” One technique supporting this process is incremental repetition. In, for example, “Wounded Man Detection Device”, lines repeat stanza to stanza before new insights can emerge. Two steps forward, one-step backward, and so it goes. “Can’t stop/ can’t go forward.”

The poetic imagery of the book is breathtaking. In the short poems, like “Hoofbeats” and “Doorway”, images are spare, precise, powerful. In the stream of consciousness poems, Whitmanesque catalogs portray the chaos, the senses fighting the mind, the mind fighting the senses, for example, “X-ray Barbecue” where the heart is filled with “snakes frogs lizards a black swamp”. Sometimes the cadence of words emulates a child’s nursery rhyme, seeking solace through simplicity: “They can’t help/They can’t do enough/They can’t fix it/ They can’t fix me.” In general, the music of the words becomes a rhythmic mantra echoing the alternating staccato and largo of the writer’s mind.

Thematically, numerous counterpoints of perspective give this work a textured complexity that is the hallmark of great writing. Dualities of sacred/profane, physical/metaphysical, child/man, past/present, mind/spirit, dream/reality, love/hate, transience/permanence define the writer’s inner struggle. They flutter through the work like a broken-winged bird glimpsing flight, yet confined to earth.

The writer's dialectic journey advances slowly against an omnipresent backdrop of time, the past seen through the selectivity of memory, the lost times of the present, the fear of the future. With poems placed in careful sequence, the writer records the "times" of his life—childhood, school, adolescence, the women, the jobs—time passing. But he also seeks to stop time, examine events past and present, and shape them into positive memory. The overarching temporal motif in this work is inventively staged and emblematic of the writer's conceptual progress. He finally accepts the past as it was, not as he would want it to be, and that acceptance frees him to move to the future.

My personal favorite is "Body Memory" because it illustrates all the facets of the work already discussed. Each simple word picture of childhood symbolizes a wound in the soul. The retrospective of time, "time passes but nothing is lost", overlays the pictures with a dark palette of mental anguish. Here is the cadence of nursery rhyme in the repetition of "my ** remembers", the repetition almost as prayer seeking mystical transcendence from the worldly pain. The physical/metaphysical dualism springs from a base of simplicity, the simple memories of childhood that should be good and nurturing but are not.

The later poems turn calm and reflective. Affirmation comes in the redemptive "Autonomy" where sun/moon merge to represent an ultimate transition from conflict to cohesion, duality to monism. After examining exhaustive kaleidoscopes of the images and ideas of his life, the writer achieves oneness with his total self--his nature, his lack of early nurture, his present and future actions, his impetuous mind, his spirit. He reaches the answer—that the patriarch of his life must be found within himself. Finally, in "Listen", a last sensory, childlike train excursion reinforces the idea of being on one track now bound for the future, bringing the child forward with the man.

While this is one man's journey, it's also the journey of everyman (and woman), the thirst for the all-encompassing answer that makes everything right, no matter what scale of demons, slights, mistakes, grievances populate their pasts.

What do I say about the work as a whole? It is a "Starfall" of beauty, a truly compelling vision richly imagined and set forth, and as spiritually revealing as it is evocative. There are no "stars out of reach" in this literary effort.