

THE TRAVELING OF CLARITY

Review of
 J. T. Ledbetter
Gethsemani Poems
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Reviewed by **S. Christian Hempstead**

Since several of J. T. Ledbetter's seventeen poems in *Gethsemani Poems* have appeared over the last eight years in *The Merton Seasonal*, I may presume some familiarity and so offer some comments on the collection. But first I would like to extend a metaphor for the rough traveling of clarity one expects generally to find in a poem, that singularly wrought form for the fictive voice.

Without undue demand, one expects a poem to trace the terrain of uneven understanding, to plow into the cross-sea of interwoven metaphor, and perhaps even to swoop and dive amidst the unstable air of uncertainties. Thoughts ought to nest in private contexts. Emotional nuance ought to beckon the eye and heart to read the shades of light in every image. What distinguishes a poem and its wrought quality is its containment of these things. One expects a collection to meter such containment, for the poems to be aware of their companions. Such self-consciousness belongs especially to poetry, so long as it is not obsessive. Clarity which travels too easily tends not only to be illusory but yields to the grit of emotion and sensate reality. It ceases to travel at all.

Personally speaking, that rough travel requires the pleasure of rhythms, the teasing of vowels and consonants, the punctuating phrase, the solitary use of a stunning image, or craft and design in repetition. For me it requires the surprise of a clown on a camel's back, the foundling phrase, the prodigal word, some kind of music.

Now and again in Jack Ledbetter's poems there are images pleasing in themselves, or attending to a reclusive feeling or relation between object and idea. A few of these occur in the poem "Winter," such as, "trace the web of ice . . .", "eyes covered by dead texts," "the furnace of the cradle," and "gravelly rivers stop . . . to listen." Other of his images which stand out include: "familiar groves of thought," and "silence . . . scuffing off the workshoes." But from poem to poem images reappear with too great frequency. I note especially: white crosses, iron (trees and hills), breathing and breath, silence, the Abbey, a cold church, leaves (sun-dappled, dry, damp), God (who waits and tenses), foxes, stones, circling crows, monks (as a unit), and thrumming (wires and hymns).

These things are presented directly rather than evoked, and then, even if original, become hackneyed by recurrence. I sense the repetition is not done by design. The poems are presented in an order which ignores such overuse of key words, phrases, images and ideas. Either the collection suggests variations on selected themes, as if each poem were integral to the whole, or the collection is short on range and thus begs a cutting to the most succinct and genuine representation of the poet's particular urge inspired by his visits to the Abbey of Gethsemani.

So I will make note of only a few of the poems. The collection begins with the poem "First Light," where the images of spirit and eyes being gouged in the act of early waking work hard against an alternate significance of seeing "Christ of the white-washed wall [which] becomes your morning prayer and birth-breath." The poem "Summer" takes high moral ground in the direct address to "you" whose "poor world of petty dreams and soured

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grace” lumps me personally into the speaker’s own condition. Not feeling so inclined, I subsequently mistrust the voice of the poem and mildly resent the presumption of familiarity. Perhaps the bells of the poem have called someone home to “bow in silence . . . to stand naked and silent under the sudden rain of psalms,” with that someone’s “soul upturned, drinking,” but the poem offers me no good reason why I should be included in such upturning. If the device is rhetorical, the self-effacement seems unconvincing. The compulsion to drink the rain of psalms remains utterly private throughout the collection, although, as in the first part of “Summer,” the image of clouds washing the dark hills with rain attempts to open the environment to me as reader and non-participant. Most of the subsequent poems, however, go on to dislocate privacy from its contexts and to tangle rather than interweave relational metaphors.

In contrast, however, a poem in the middle of the group, “Gethsemani Abbey/ Kentucky (remembering),” gets into some motion and makes room for the reader. It is a poem of four stanzas where the speaker first locates his gaze outward from Thomas Merton’s hermitage. The personal father image is recollected while a group of distant monks fades into dusk, and while crows circle ominously above trees appearing as iron. The speaker then recollects an aunt and his father at home on an Illinois farm, and ends with his father driving him to his flight, as follows:

So we drove through the warm night,
 my father silhouetted in the blue dash light
 hungry to please me, talking of woods,
 how it was time to come home.
 And I caught his eye in the mirror, thinking of my plane waiting in the darkness
 like my aunt’s fiery cherubim with their wings
 covering their feet.

The association of iron as heavy, dark, cold, lifeless, unbending succeeds into a collusion of the father’s image and the speaker’s recollection of their relationship. That last stanza glides deeply into an unresolved bond which revolves indistinctly around the literalness of home and of being saved and its more metaphorical counterparts. Twilight contains the waiting father, the waiting escape-flight, the recollection itself, and these contrast sharply with the aunt’s black-and-white salvation TV spirituality of confrontation and her apparent disregard of soul and identity. The father’s blue-light car and the aunt’s winged plane provide deliverance from one kind of home. Yet a sadness is evoked in the tension of hunger and waiting. The talk of woods and the mirrored eye tell of an all-too-familiar separation, unguided and unremarked. The Merton-hermitage ethos of the homeless wanderer emerges in the unsettling demand to abandon identity as the crow-cowled monks define the very indistinctness of the unfamiliar home. The self containment of covered feet, as of the angel and the airplane, may be part of the sadness.

In *Gethsemani Poems* clarity travels roughly enough at times, but, unfortunately, in nearly every poem some event in craft or construction fully arrests the act of reading. Verb phrases are strung without the rhythm for breathing, as in the poem “Winter” where breathing, listening and waiting are central to the speaker’s sense of gratitude (“who will sing to these holy men of Gethsemani?”). Enough foxes occur in the book of poems to fill a furrier’s farm — a certain momentary surprise is lost in the abundance. Wheelbarrow words such as “cross” and “the Christ” bear the freight of locomotives — too much presumed agreement simply flattens such signifiers. The continual address to the second and collective persons of “you” and “our” only reinforces to me, the reader, my distance from the poet’s moments of prayer and his professed yet ultimately solitary joy.

Indeed, while there is enough praying in *Gethsemani Poems* to blow down the barn, the experience of the poems themselves reveals few secrets, except when the self-conscious effort to be a prayer or a poem is for a moment suspended. But if even one crucial and musical stanza lives to travel in that moment, it is always to be appreciated.