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ghost on 3rd

by Jim Reese. NYQ Books, 2010. 88 pages. 6 x 9". \$14.95. ISBN-13: 978-1935520177

REVIEWED BY DAVID DOODY

In *ghost on 3rd*, Jim Reese's second book, poems of fatherhood live side by side with poems about working with prisoners, in an unlikely juxtaposition somewhat eerily mediated by the poet's childhood memory of murder in his small town.

In addition to being an Associate Professor of English at Mount Marty College in South Dakota and Editor in Chief of *Paddlefish*, Reese has been the National Endowment for the Arts' Writer in Residence at the Yankton Federal Prison Camp since 2008.

In "Missing" we learn that the murders of two boys in Nebraska by a sexual predator took place in Reese's neighborhood when he was a child, leaving him, at thirty-five years old, still unable to get the murders out of his head. As a father Reese worries about a world in which he has to ask, as in "The Metal Detector,"

As I tuck her into bed tonight, I wonder:
will monsters with canes
and bloody shirts interrupt what should be
precious thoughts of this world we live in?

Such experiences make it hard to know why someone would place himself among the people who have been convicted of crimes like the one that took place in Reese's childhood neighborhood and have left him with a gnawing fear for his daughters' well being. In one of the best poems in this collection, however, Reese reveals a gift for empathy. "Jesus Christ Pose" describes a prisoner "In a theatre practicum in San Quentin":

You raise your hands, palms up.
head dangling down,
you Jesus Christ pose.
You begin to stand on one foot.
*Every morning, you say, after my foster father left for work,
she made me stand in the corner like this.*

Reese concludes with such dry certainty it made me flinch in recognition and agreement: "And now I understand why/some of you are here."

“Jesus Christ Pose” suggests and acquired understanding of why some heinous crimes happen. Through a poet’s work with people who commit them, he is forced to look closer and closer at their human faces, as in “Vernon is Taking the Dirty Dog Home”:

I’ve been instructed never to get too close
to any inmate. But I’m your teacher, and I’m afraid that’s just not
possible. Tonight, like most nights,
I carry you home.

Caught in the enigma of how humans can both love and hurt, Reese is torn between his constant drive to protect his daughters (“You want to ride your bike around the block-/by yourself”) and his desire to help the sort of people whose actions have made the world a dangerous place in which his daughters need protecting.

In the poems more fully given over to the joys and frustrations of fatherhood, Reese is most successful when he makes the language and scene beautiful or intense for the reader, as in “How do you like my M’s?”:

The sidewalk art
glows with glee.
My daughter’s sand box toys
are strewn across the yard.
It’s nine o’clock and, for two more hours,
if Willow doesn’t wake,

this time is ours.
The cool buzz on the baby monitor,
the cheesy brats bursting on the grill,
the gurgle and kiss.

The subtle rhyme of “art” and “yard” and the not-so-subtle rhyme of “hours” and “ours,” along with the alliteration throughout (“glows,” “glee,” “gurgle”; “buzz,” “baby,” “brats bursting”; “Willow,” “wake”) make this scene poetic. It is a heartwarming and vivid scene, made more so by Reese’s attention to craft rather than simply relying on family sentiment.

Other poems of family in the collection are less successful. “Would you mind reading this new poem?” appears to be exactly what the title implies—a poet asking his wife to read a new poem and the conversation that ensues. Thematically, the only thing of interest in this poem is when the speaker asks about a particular line in the “new poem,” because the line shows up again in the final poem in this book (“Free those breasts and their veiny road maps”), giving us a glimpse of the poet’s process.

Similarly, “At Three Years My Daughter Recites Her First Poem” is presumably just what the title says, perhaps a poem only a father could love:

Dad. Look!
I'm a stinky monkey
hanging on the doorknob
like a fart.

If in some poems Reese falls into the parental trap of bragging about the accomplishments of his children, in others he takes up the challenge of showing where family scenes and experiences can take us, while crafting the language to equal the beauty and intensity of the moment.

There are lighter moments in *ghost on 3rd*, as well. In “The Woman Who Wishes to Remain Anonymous Bake a Cherry Pie” we were reminded of the fact that family and friends of writers live in constant worry that they will show up in a poem or story. Therefore, we read about Reese’s mother-in-law as “The Woman Who Wishes to Remain Anonymous.” Funnier still in this poem, the pie they are eating was made from cherries that she froze in 1978, leading his father-in-law to say, “We’ve been eating it and haven’t got sick yet.”

Reese again lightens things up when, in “Poetry Reading-Tonight,” he describes an awkward poetry reading with poets who seem to be more into the *idea* of being a poet than concerned with the actual quality of their poetry: “The pale poet with his receding hairline; / who is still hanging onto his Pearl Jam/ ponytail,” and “His major artistic influence— Mr. / Magoo and trail mix, which keeps him regular.”

And then there are poems that succeed as observational poems, such as “The Grass Alley,” in which Reese describes an elderly neighbor smelling her flowers:

What I wouldn't do
when I'm Mrs. McCann's age-
still stopping

to breathe the pleasure
of another new
dawn.

In pieces such as this, Reese is not simply showing us a picture; he forces us to think beyond the present. It is in that propulsion forward when Reese is the most successful and his poems most interesting. In *ghost on 3rd* Jim Reese is at his best when he pushes his subjects to give him a little more than they would on their own.

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