

HIRAM POETRY REVIEW

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Bunch of Animals
Henry Hughes
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A cursory look at the career of Henry Hughes reveals a tremendous set of experiences. He is a writer, fisherman, thinker, poet, traveler, eater of raw fish and professor. He's been around. Indiana, Japan, China, Long Island and Oregon. I mention his varied background because that literal sense of physical movement marks the energy of this collection. There are also those moments when the world slows down for the speaker, like when he says that he's tired and can't get out of bed or worse. We wonder what's wrong but then, as is the case with some Japanese narratives, there is an abrupt turning away from resolution. In this collection that turning is towards animals, and quite often animals supply the tension and not the poet. While animals are certainly the main attraction here, let me draw your attention to other aspects of Hughes' newest book.

In addition to the experiential richness in Hughes' poems, we see a real sensitivity to craft. In particular, Hughes takes great care with the stanza, which means little room in Italian. Hughes takes this aspect of poetry seriously and we are entertained by his attention to detail. Hughes has a strong voice, but the strength comes from a quiet confidence in the craft of poetry, which lets the poems, stanzas, images speak for themselves. In poems like "A Little Closer," metaphor and narrative collapse into one another until we are uncertain, which one is primary and which is more important. At the end of the poem this narrative uncertainty does not bother us because we have a sense of strong feeling that, necessarily, can't be resolved.

Hughes' poetic ability draws on his own expertise as a writer and an editor. We can see this clarity on a consistent and exquisite basis throughout the collection. There is not a word out of place in these poems. As a result, there is a kind of organic quality to Hughes' narratives and metaphors. For example, in "The Last Tool You'll Need," Hughes brings the screwdriver (the drink and the tool together) in such a way that we see the tool as the luxury and the drink as the necessity. This nuanced and comedic irony distinguishes many of the poems. In "Fishing Hungover," we get one of several drinking episodes, but I would describe Hughes' representation of drinking with the classical epithet—In Vino Veritas. The truth that emerges in this poem is that fishing is a great cure for hangovers and a cure that makes the speaker not worry about being bruised and sore from who knows what? Perhaps preaching from his chair in a bar or falling asleep awkwardly after a night of love. The poem and/or this reviewer barely makes such insinuations after reading. However, this evocativeness typifies many of the poems in this collection, which of course do get their inspiration from

animals, yet animals function as a point of departure into the human world of suffering relieved by moments of quiet happiness.

What impresses and rewards in Hughes' work is his sensitivity to audience. Certainly, there is the welcoming voice of the lyric poet here, but these well-crafted poems say—Listen. What we hear in "Chorus Stegosaurus" is a cosmic sadness expressed in the form of parental generosity. The poem moves from the whims of young child to a voice of from the parental world, which says we can do whatever you want today. Of course the parents know better but don't share that with the child. These poems share a lot of with their directness, simplicity, complexity and power.