

Karen Enns, *Ordinary Hours*. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 2014. Pp. 66. Softcover, \$20.00.

In a recent issue of *Image* magazine (No. 86), American poet Li-Young Lee says: “[T]here should be tons of information in a poem. I don’t mean information from the phenomenal world alone. I mean spiritual information, emotional information, concrete information.”

Karen Enns’s second collection has all of these. The first poem begins with the statement: “Nothing is happening.” This claim and the book’s title, *Ordinary Hours*, seem to prepare the reader for a kind of standing still, an emptiness, a stasis. True, “Rachmaninoff plays,” but plays “in another room.” The rich details of actions, colours and sounds that follow the opening statement are not actually present, though they are abundantly possible. The poem ends with the assertion: “There is absence, not emptiness,/ and something close to echo.”

It is an apt introduction to a collection where absence and silence are as important as what can be seen and heard right here, right now. The poems offer generous helpings of tangible details, but these are offset by intimations of what’s behind and beyond those details: a world that, though seemingly absent, is potently present.

There is an absence of urgency: the reader is not hurried from page to page but invited to linger, to relish the graceful rhythms and taste the perfectly arranged words as they slip over the tongue. To be still and listen for the echo.

The photographer in “At the bus stop” “... settles on one retina, the corner of a tooth, one lobe.” The poet too is equipped with a keen eye and the patience to keep it focused on the particular. Like that photographer, she reaches for what is at the heart of things, striving always “to get at what [s]he thinks is essence, /the pure form ...” This often results in short gems in which the poet’s observations are perfectly distilled, nothing extraneous, as in “To Walk into that Beauty,” where the concrete and the abstract, the physical and the spiritual are held in tension.

To walk into that beauty
 the way he walks into the barn
 ...
 as if to ride the arm of heat
 coming from the burnt out fields
 is a matter of fidelity.

Form and essence are masterfully harmonized, whether in short statements – “A rooster cracks the distance” – or in flowing, enjambed lines: “The ditches overgrown with chickory and Queen Anne’s lace/were what mattered in the moment/and the moment mattered on and on/and on.”

There is never an attempt to impress, simply a quiet witness to a world of ordinary things easily unnoticed by the impatient passerby. Attention is drawn to the quotidian through language that is unadorned yet always fresh and right. Unforced connections catch the reader by surprise. The rooster, for instance, is a “featherweight evangelist,” and for a camp survivor, “Soup is thought.” In “Suite for Tools” the hoe is “Lean as a thin lipped aunt that snips/ loose thread with her teeth” and the plow evokes “Dark matter turned/ to the understorey light.”

Images that recall a childhood lived in a rural Mennonite community are woven into the collection: crabapple trees, idling tractors and farm tools. Sunday afternoons – “white tablecloth, beef for lunch, a nap” – were marked by “a different kind of quiet.”

The poet understands that ordinary routine and ceremony are what constitute life. But she also possesses what Lee calls “the knowledge of our condition of deep embeddedness in a cosmic context.” Her keen awareness of that larger sphere, that tapestry of history and memory against which all ordinary lives are lived, is evident in “William Street Elegies,” a series about loss and exile, where long-dead loved ones are seen as if in dreams or mist. Or through a glass darkly. “Where are the thoughtful ones,” the poet asks. “They watch us/ with the tired, clear eyes of chess players/ who have thought through every move behind them,/ every move ahead and lost.” The voices of these shadowy figures – “the thoughtful ones” – are soft but insistent. Their suffering is never elaborated but hinted at by words or phrases that evoke sadness.

Whether paying tribute to an era of Mennonite history marked by exile, flight and fear or drawing attention to the natural world, these poems are shot through with absence and longing. In “The Crow,” the reader is asked to

Imagine a time after its flight: the branch bare
but the spirit of its shape stamped there
as long as you remember that ruffled back
in the metal grey sky, as long as you see it,
in absence, more clearly.

Given the author’s background in music, it is not surprising to hear strains of piano, violin or cello wafting through the work. But

the playing happens in another room or is remembered afterwards. Sound is never intrusive in these poems, but more likely to be a breath, a whisper, an echo.

Just as sound is never intrusive, and often balanced with silence, so light and shadow play off each other in a dance that is graceful, controlled and constrained. To live, the poet muses, is to “walk from shadow into light.”

“Ordinary Hours” is a lovely book that satisfies the senses, speaks to the mind and stirs the emotions.

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