

Leonard Neufeldt, *Painting Over Sketches of Anatolia*. Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2015. Pp. 90. Softcover, \$14.95.

Leonard Neufeldt's sixth collection of poems, *Painting Over Sketches of Anatolia*, does not represent a major departure in subject matter or technique for him, but may well be his best work as an artist. Neufeldt is retired from a distinguished career as a professor of American literature at Purdue, the University of Texas, and the University of Washington. He has published in academic journals and books on Emerson and Thoreau. His roots are in Yarrow, BC, coming from a Russian Mennonite immigrant family, and he was a student at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg in the late 1950s.

Born in 1937, Neufeldt is roughly the same age as American poets Mark Strand, Mary Oliver, and Charles Wright. And while he doesn't have the wry self-consciousness of Strand, he does share Oliver's powerful sense of the natural world, and also Wright's metaphysical, even mystical reach, a reflection perhaps of all those years reading the New England transcendentalists. Popular culture is nearly invisible in all four of these poets. The Canadian poet David McFadden, only three years younger than Neufeldt, inhabits a different universe, one where the newspaper constantly intrudes on the poet's mind and punctures his material. Another difference: the vivid American demotic of a poet like Charles Wright is absent in Neufeldt's work.

Painting Over Sketches of Anatolia is divided into three sections, the first titled "Portraits in Different Voices," and it opens with "The End of Plato":

Either the wind or some animal's
 distress. Even if one knew,
 what difference would it make except to remind you
 that too much knowing is earthbound,
 that winter has come to live with you like a son
 newly divorced, his life spread out in every room?

Neufeldt favours long stanzas, minimal sound play and rhyme, and line breaks determined mostly by syntactic unit, but even with all his characteristic restraint, this is an impressive start to a poem. The animal's distress is provocatively placed in a new line, and we gradually realize the animal is going to be Plato, august figure of Western rationality, on his deathbed. Enjambment almost swallows the little chime of "knew" and "you", and the simile of the newly divorced son, with his metaphorically distributed life, is a perfect humanizing gesture, another reminder of the end.

Not everything in this first section is successful. The voices seem somewhat undifferentiated in terms of diction and rhetoric, often in the second person, the same treatment Neufeldt has given historical figures in previous books like *Yarrow* (1993). "Röcken, Germany: Nietzsche Grave and Monument," is typical Neufeldt subject matter, featuring international travel and an iconic figure from Western intellectual history. But the poem itself cites obscure biographical elements about Nietzsche, and employs abstractions that don't quite hit their mark: "a future almost ready for the mind's hazards/and the word's chaos of joy turning the present over... ." Then "Trotsky Explains Lenin to Frida Kahlo," in spite of its clever, tabloid-like title, is also cryptic in a way that frustrates the reader; I was baffled by the sudden shift to discussing Stalin in the last stanza.

Neufeldt really hits his stride in the second section, which carries the book's title, and is set in Turkey, where he has frequently travelled. "How to Beat the Heat in Bodrum" is filled with rich observation and sound nuggets: "...let the lizard on the wall/ jerk his head up to thrum his throat," and "Olive Harvest on the Terraces" sings with allusion and assonance:

An apparition of white butterflies
 veers as one from tree to tree
 against the morning's incessant blue.

As one might expect from an Emerson scholar, Neufeldt voices a kind of wisdom literature at times, locating it in an olive harvest:

and stripping a tree of most of its olives
and many of its leaves is easier
than forgiving our teachers.

These lines intrigue me, and I wish that Neufeldt further explored *why* his speaker struggles to forgive his teachers, in a phrase somewhat diluted by the second person (“our”). Neufeldt’s stance in his poems is consistently secular and cosmopolitan. But the little Mennonite village where he grew up and that he has paid tribute to as an editor and scholar, housed a worldview completely at odds with his mature poetic voice. There is a geographical hint of this same conflict later, in “Ancient Dwelling Below the Black Sea,” where “Grandfather stared this way/ from the far side, Crimea...” but he doesn’t explore it.

“Midday Meal at the Tigris River” again features lovely assonance: “the kingfisher preening an olive tree’s/braids of wind-silvered green...” and the second-last stanza has a remarkable sequence naming the anatomy of a scorpion, with a powerful ending that encapsulates the “glory of the body’s joy” from the second stanza. That poetry of the senses also shows up in “Ismail’s Restaurant,” where Neufeldt hears (and sees) “a brattle of three black hens”.

“Traditions and the New Near Mardin” struck me as too diffuse, too much like a tourist brochure. But there are many pleasures in the longer poems in this section, and “Namaz at Dawn” has gorgeous lines like these: “The bather/ enters a half-halo of water, divides it like a seal,/ changes course to find the sun.”

In poetry which certainly could not be described as confessional, “Think of This Earth, My Love,” the book’s third section, is more personal and intensely charged than the earlier ones. Neufeldt starts at a third person distance, but by the second poem, “The Season That Ages Words,” he’s in the first person, and images of winter recur and function as an extended metaphor for both aging and the making of poetry, producing an effect both nostalgic and compelling. “Walking the Harbour” reaches lyrical heights in clipped, modest language, and shows Neufeldt at his eloquent best: “A cormorant folds into the black of its wings./ Nothing is lost”.

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