

Twig: poems from 3901. Carey J. Bishop, Andrew Draskoy, C.M. Hoyles, Paul Whittle. St. John's: Backroads Books, ix, 68 pp., softcover, n. p., 1998, ISBN 0-9683521-0-3.

VICTOR COLEMAN

HOW TO APPROACH, critically, an anthology of student writing — especially one edited by the students themselves? Some would say, with great trepidation; others, with an open mind and a measured sense of generosity, i. e., give 'em the benefit of the doubt. Having taught creative writing, variously at York and Queen's University, and in Toronto's secondary school system, I tend toward the latter stance.

If part of the motivation of a creative writing student *isn't* liberation, chances are the writing will be cramped and crabby, of little interest beyond the recorded data: I did this, she did that, the sum of those, etc. With that liberation comes the difficult break with tradition that is barely absorbed through high school English and literature studies, and the concomitant need for experiment: creative writing class as *laboratory*. I try to keep in touch with some of the students I had through the Seventies and Eighties. An appreciable few went on to writing careers, happily, and others further honed their skills to pass things on to others as educators of one sort or another, still others probably thought "What drive!" and went on to become bus drivers or policemen, nurses or crisp executives.

The creative writing instructor's methodology is limited by the mere fact of student practice. One is there to listen and respond, and although the response will be critical it should never be so heavily laden with contemporary theory that one loses sight of the text. Presumably student creative writers are there to write, not to hold the text up to the light of anti-text. Relative quality is all; and recognition of

pure self-indulgence. There are, simplistically, two main approaches to the teaching of creative writing: the active, wherein students are encouraged to follow the guidelines of certain traditions and to write to given specifications, i. e., write a sonnet about basketball containing all the primary colours in rainbow sequence; or the passive, wherein the workshop is everything, the student is on her own, and things begin to seem a tad psychoanalytic after awhile.

In an interview published after his second book was published, one of my students from the early Eighties allowed as how I had “saved him from terminal lyricism” — a comment I understood as compliment. Another, in his recently published first book of poetry acknowledges that I had pointed out to him “the fork in the road.” This is all very gratifying.

Which is why I can look at *Twig* and receive intense pleasure, as David McFadden would say, from it. Yes, these student writers often bite off more than they can comfortably chew, like Demosthenes with the pebbles under his tongue. Yes, they take on the biggest themes (life, death, love, urban morass) and are often beaten by them. With enough foresight their own embarrassment would be palpable. But now their heads are highly held, their step is quicksilver quick, and their “dance to the music of time” is more often a jig, as in

listen

*dance new steps to daily music:
neither accept dragon-gold burden
nor wind myself in other's tracks.
embrace stumbles, not wallpaper
belly's outward whirlpool surges-
desire every stretch, twist, slide, swing...
flickering fingers weave patterns
spin free quick-ordered rattle, heel on wood
plait watery strands of learn & guess*

Fiona Heald

There's even a slight hint of “language poetry” there, although I'd wager it came by osmosis and not exposure to Clark Coolidge or Lisa Robertson. And this collection is peppered throughout with the spirit of Allen Ginsberg, suggesting that, had he survived his cancer he might have been a primary influence on yet *another* generation of writers, which would have been his fourth. I think he would have appreciated the association and even the outright imitations (yet another valuable creative writing exercise), as in

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from *Little Boys Blue*

*I can recall someone tipping over one of the glasses of wine
and there being a small fuss as we all scrambled
to wipe the white cloth clean*

“This is my blood, which shall be given up...”

*I watched them as they went away.
Like mocking ghosts, their clumsy shadows growing
longer and longer behind them as they
marched into the sun
into the great hole in the sky that blazed
like a scarlet scar on the baby blue.
And I heard the sun whisper*

*“Oh, Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn!
The sheep’s in the meadow, the cow’s in the corn...”*

*And the little blue face with the hole in its head
having spilt forth its final stream of blood
slowly sank
sank beneath the rim of the earth
never to rise again*

Ryan Tilley

The great tragedy in all this — maybe tragedy’s too heavy — is that only the students themselves, and a few of their peers, will read this appreciable work with any kind of real attention. It can easily be sloughed off as immature work unworthy of serious reflection. The reality is pretty bleak, as I’ve told many a naïve young student looking to make big bucks and a reputation as a writer in a world of prizes in plethora and slam contests. The ivory tower is a very lonely place, and the poet/monk/nun is seldom showered with rose petals. The accolades will mostly come from too close to home, and — oh yeah — be prepared for big time neglect, especially when you most need to broaden your critical perspective. If you want to take on the Cosmos, more power to you; just don’t forget to wear your parachute.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t give a tip o’ the Hatlo hat to Twig’s “navigator,” Mary Dalton, who obviously knows about that fork in the road.