

POSSESSED BY LANGUAGE

Michael Perkins. *Carpe Diem: New and Selected Poems*. Bushwhack Books, 2011.

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Michael Perkins writes with clarity, precision, directness, and with a quiet simplicity and sense of rectitude that are increasingly rare in contemporary poetry. Now in his late sixties, Perkins has been honing his craft, modestly and usually in the shadows, for more than forty years. He understands that poems are composed not only out of words and phrases but also out of silences, and in his best work he displays a mastery of tone and cadence that is all his own. In the concluding lines of “March,” from the “Almanac” sequence of 1997, for instance, he writes: “Every day the radio reminds us / That Mars is the god of war / And March is his month.”

One of my favorites in this collection, “Midnight in the Garden,” a poem of personal experience that could also stand as a testament to an entire period in American life, is remarkable for its courage and candor:

Bruise on her breast,
Not my fingertips,
Gloss on her lips,
Not licked from me.
Hair a tangled halo
I hadn't mussed,
Eyes swollen and wanton,
Not turned my way,
Her smell of lust
Stronger than sharpest memory;
I could not swallow,
I could barely see.
This was what it meant:
This was being free.

The last two lines, simple as they are, etch themselves in the memory because of the subtle movement of the rhymes: first, the long *e* of “memory” is repeated in the rhyme on “see,” and then the entire *ry* phoneme returns in the word that concludes the poem. The approach could not be more straightforward, but here, as elsewhere in the collection, the irregular and asymmetrical use of rhyme and meter heightens the poem's turns and cadences. If one were to say, in a different context, “This was what it meant;

this was being free,” nothing would be more banal; but coming at the end of “Midnight in the Garden,” the utterance is deeply moving. This is a lesson about poetry that we learn from Michael Perkins’ poetry.

Perkins is part Epicurean and part Buddhist, and the title he has chosen for this collection, *Carpe Diem*, is perfectly apt to the constellation of themes orbiting around the poems and binding them to one another: the desire to seize hold of the sweetness of life and the impossibility of doing so; loss, regret, and the awareness of transience; the artist’s self-conscious attempt to hold onto the past through the medium of the poem, and his simultaneous awareness that, whatever the poem encloses, it can never succeed in containing life. In “Maneuvers,” for example, Perkins registers the fact that all lyric poems are, in a sense, elegies, both for the passage of time and, because the latter can be represented but never recaptured, for themselves:

The lines march across the pages
Like columns of men in single file
On a mission to retake the past.

Autumns when we walked the Great Beach.
Summer evenings under the shade tree.
So few lines to hold so many memories.

The poet is fully aware, furthermore, that though we try to seize hold of life, it is ultimately life that seizes hold of us, and that even as we seek to shape our experience in language the language is shaping and determining us at the same time. “The Grammar of Necessity” (dedicated, I am proud to say, to me) registers a grim truth that Freud understood but that most of us, especially most Americans—and most American poets in particular—would rather not see:

I blame it on the books,
Those oracles of chance
In whose pages we happen
Upon our future selves.

The sentences led the way
Through the unspoken,
And the books followed:
Each word arranged to make sense
Of being here, alive like this,
Looking out at the bright sun.

At last each of us is owned
By our words and the sentences
We have imposed upon ourselves;
By the inexorable
Grammar of need, and the
Iron laws of reversal,
Recurrence and certain closure.

We are possessed by language:
Our mouths are forced open by it,
Our vocabularies betray
Our most recondite display.
No one escapes his words;
Even in the final
Subterranean refuge,
The syllables rise up in our throats.