

of nothing happens to you, Maxes, that's peace.
Which is what we want. Trust me.

Here Ritvo suggests death, like all things, is a pro-cess. He is addressing the mice, which in turn, leave him with an understanding of his body, it's failing state of being. He is allowing us access to his mind, and by the end of the poem, it's clear this collection is not a case of denial. Ritvo has moved into a stage of self-assurance. Though much of the collection deals with Ritvo's consciousness, his personal feel-ings and farewells to a myriad of people and things, his meditations on death feel universal. They are not concerned with pity or inspiration. They only attempt to convey a physical state, a situation, a pro-cess, while utilizing an informal voice. From "After-noon" he writes:

When I was about to die
my body lit up
like when I leave my house
without my wallet.

What's most interesting about this passage is the disarming nature of the language, the almost instan-taneous recognition the reader feels with the author. That is the power of Ritvo's poetry—he invites you not to feel *for* him, but to feel with him. And though the illness that took his life is a presence in nearly all the poems of the collection—taking form as bul-bous shapes, or animals, or pain—Ritvo still man-ages to include his warm sensitivity to life and love. Because even in his condition—some would say in spite of it—there are still people, things, and ideas to love everywhere. From Listerine Strips to my-thology to hats, Ritvo easily and intimately informs the reader of the small pleasures he still took while strapped to hospital machines, isolated in the loneli-est spaces at home. The poems reinforce that there is so much to experience and learn in our lives, an

astounding amount of things, and for much of that life our attention is focused on acquiring, but Ritvo reminds us it is important not to let go of what we've already accumulated. In an exchange with his therapist Ritvo explains:

Things don't change unless we want them to.
And why would we want to give up
the little things we know,
when we know so little?

Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations* (a title which may refer to the stage four cancer) is a beautiful, emotionally-charged collection that comes with an awareness of self, occasionally distracting, but in a way that feels true and honest. The work is consistent, conscious of death and life, love and pain, the moments of our existence that make us feel most alive, accomplishing this in a voice that sounds eerily like our own. A voice with so much more to share, but no more time to share it.

—Alex Tronson

Elaine Sexton. *Prospect/Refuge*. Sheep Meadow Press, 2015.

Elaine Sexton lovingly crafts her poems with an attention to language that is painterly and agile, intimate and tender. She effortlessly records her observations and thoughts with a Zen-like ease. Thoughts arise and flee. Her poems, like her eye, move from one perch to another, one image or metaphor to a different one, digress and completely lead the reader on a different course with the element of surprise. She shapes her poems with a light hand and short lines. Her forms move from couplets to quatrains to sonnets with deft skill, but disparage rhyme and narrative. The measured rhythms of her words and her masterful use of line breaks gives a swift, conversational pace to her work.

This subject matter however is not as light and easy as I might have suggested. Death; botching a big love affair; the predicament of women; the loneliness of New York City; 9/11; the harshness of men; a mother's legacy; these subjects alternate with more mundane ones, such as hair, laugh tracks on TV, or landscape and place, such as Long Island Sound with a memory of the shore, a childhood homestead. In Sexton's work one subject may lead to several others. These associations are mentioned in passing and come from the poet's everyday ebb and flow of thought. The pleasures of life and language always seem to effervesce in Sexton's verse. There is a wonderful element of discovery in the poems, exploring where thoughts and feelings might lead, discoveries which the poet herself seems to relish. And Sexton is always generous with her warmth, her humor, and inventive with her metaphors.

In "Only Sky," the poet appears in the midst of a quarrel with herself. She steps outside the house and encounters the sea, the shoreline and the vast sky. She writes:

... the way a stain
in the sky

makes us want to
stop the car, stop thinking,
call a friend to
come out of her house,

her kitchen, leave the burners on,
but come *now*
because beauty is likely to burn up
the minute you turn your back.

You know *life* is long
a friend once offered.
A perfect lie. . .

The topic of love comes to play in "Drive":

... When

driving I think of love
as a road trip, the soaring,
the break down, jump

starts, the brand new,
and old reliable.
I'm no mechanic

though I once knew
how to change a fan belt
sheared to a thread.

And the sad ending of "The Clock" which is acutely filled with the specificity of time and place and our attempt to fixate it in memory even as it continually is fluid and elusive:

... When I pass
through double glass doors
to daylight on West 21st Street
it is 11 o'clock exactly,
February 18th, 2011.
There is time. I feel it. I see it.
I was alive then.
You were still breathing
inside, there
in the dark
where I left you.

In a poem such as "The City," we get proof of Sexton's keen eye with her everyday treatment of urban life:

...so many curious dogs,
for instance, and the stains

grizzled men leave in the gleam of
Donna Karan and Godiva

doorwells at night. This morning
at sunrise, a rat as fat as a possum

crossed her path. Every morning

Wall Streeters like farmers

pull up their socks,
suck down coffee, leave their lovers

still sleeping as the day wakes. . .

Nowhere is Sexton more revealing than in her “Poetry & Smoke: A Manifesto” at the end of the collection. It is here she lets on to some of the thoughts, which inform her practice:

I’m for a poetry that wants to paint.

* * *

. . . I was thinking of the colors,
the wide open space in them [paintings of
Francis Bacon], the
intensity of their shapes after the
stun gun of subject matter.

• * *

I’m for a poetry that sets out to
make something clear, something
visually, sonically, spatially, pleasing.
Not opaque. Not obscure. Not *overly*
sensual, either. . .

I’m for the reader. I’m for leaving
some room for the reader, a lot of
room.

* * *

. . . I’m for words arranged
in a way that makes you think
about where they come from, word
origins, words that take you back to
the beginning of something, even
if it isn’t their *real* beginnings, . . .

In all these ways, I see Sexton succeeding in her work. She is the consummate painter of language, whose airy breadth leaves one to hear the simple music of her poems long after they have finished.

—Walter Holland

Jack Smith. *Being*. Serving House Books, 2016.

At the outset of Jack Smith’s third novel, there are two things Phillip Fellows wants: a job—he’s down to his last few bucks—and the love of Sophia, the lubricious waitress who serves his daily pancakes and complains about her loutish boyfriend, Rod Busby. Phillip has arranged three job interviews—each position more improbably bizarre than the last—and at the end of the day, he has been offered, and accepted, all three jobs. Just as he settles, more or less, which one to follow through on, Sophia recruits him to break it off with Rod for her, clearing the path to be her lover. Understandably, finally possessing the woman he has so longed for, Phillip is less than keen to report to work the next day, but then Sophia quits her job, and they are stranded in a hotel room by a blizzard of apocalyptic proportions, which, while preventing him from getting to work, is magically just navigable enough for Phillip to make regular forays for food and additional condoms. His sexual appetite is limitless, as is, evidently, Sophia’s.

Here is the sort of thing Kafka might have written if he’d lived in twenty-first century America rather than twentieth century Austria: rather than trapped in a labyrinth of frustration, Smith’s protagonist is stuck on a treadmill running from one desire to the next—or more accurately, from one desire to the same desire over again. His libido is all but inexhaustible. But there is nothing heroic or Promethean in his sexuality; he is and remains an insecure feckless squid—and his various par-amours are just as goofy and feckless in their own way. Since Smith won’t allow us to imagine the solution to our ills is a good screw, we must face the dilemma that Walker Percy poses in his best novels: when our needs are met and we have every reason to be satisfied, why is it life seems emptiest? Surely there must be more than this. (Parenthetically, any reader picking up this novel hoping for a series of titillating sex scenes will be disappointed. I don’t believe Smith uses so much as