

1975

The Old, Cast up on Lawns

Andrew Waterman

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jections, in principle, to poems of statement, as Waterman seems to have—though he did say himself that “poetry is of course legitimately as variable in methods and effects as its possible purposes and authors.”

I do not understand what Waterman means by calling the last ten lines “abstract,” though unresonant they may be. (Perhaps I have tried too hard to give both poems the qualities of good prose . . .) My point was that the house had no discernible effect on the German tourists—I don’t see this as putting out received attitudes or banal moral perceptions.

Some final points: I am very dubious about any sentence that begins “in all really good poetry” (is Waterman familiar with Greek, Chinese and Swahili?), and he also seems to exclude didactic poetry from his own vision of what constitutes good or great poetry. Where does this leave Lucretius and Brecht, and much of Horace, Pope, and Vergil, for instance? I must say, too, that I think much of Waterman’s criticism, in tone and treatment, tended to be reductive rather than constructive: why else spend so much more time on the weaker poem, and damn the merits he does find with faint praise (“passably competent”)? I don’t want to be ungrateful, however; it *is* salutary to have this kind of contact with a reader, and that’s the great virtue of this exercise.

The Old, Cast up on Lawns / Andrew Waterman

The old, cast up on lawns in wicker chairs
sit waiting for the sun to drop,
humped shoulders towards a screen of trees,
hands fiddling with crochet or book.

What should I say to them?
That I have been far out in passion, rain,
and come back streaked with light? They turn
patiently features rubbed, effaced,

or scored deep by more tides than they remember,
tokens of enough weather; not
really distracted from the branches charring
where gold sinks at the garden’s end.

Outgrowths of themselves, they hobble in
seeming out of habit merely propped
on shapes long warped from, once
tall in hailstorms, distance lanes’ white heat.