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On Paul Zimmer

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ON PAUL ZIMMER

Paul Zimmer is fond of apples. "In Apple Country" transforms the image of "Apple Blight," the earliest poem saved in this *Selected*, and he includes several other uses of the image. The late poem makes it one of plenitude. An imagined, or suspected plenitude must quicken any notion of forbidden fruit, at least so I assume. This imagining is serene, however, and unencumbered with guilt, though it can neither be quite right nor permissible.

If all the apples ripening
On one fall day and all the circles
Ever grown in these orchards
Draped across the driftless hills
Were counted by a great master,
They would total the number of stars . . .

What a conceit, we may protest. But then, after a moment of denial, I put aside the mathematics. There are many, many of both. Not being a great master, it's beyond me to number either. To think toward the equation of apples with stars is more satisfying than to insist on an accounting. And to find that the apple, the fruit that when halved makes a circle more perfect than any we drew in school—that too is in the poem—that the apple, in its flowering over generations on Wisconsin hills, provides a splendid image of gracious infinity—or a gracious image of splendid infinity—of infinity as a perfect circle that seeds infinity from its core, that is a moment to cherish in poetry; and it's pure Zimmer.

These few lines are characteristic of the poet, his relaxed balance of the formal and informal, his tendency toward a flexible three beat line, his remarkable way of saying a lot while seeming to say rather little. Almost every line begins with a capital letter, as if each is a distinct surge in the overall flow of the poem. Small use is made of line breaks

Crossing to Sunlight: Selected Poems by Paul Zimmer. University of Georgia Press, 1996. 166 pp. \$29.95, cloth; \$14.95, paper.

for dramatic impact. Drama is usually muted, a touch sad, and accepting of our shortcomings. Often the self is displaced and objectified as “Zimmer,” not quite “formulated, sprawling on a pin,” but with that suggestion. The poems are scrupulous not just in admitting embarrassment and failure but in admitting occasional daydreams of glory.

These are selections from eleven books in over thirty-five years. Most of that time, Zimmer has worked in publishing and has written poems on the evenings, weekends, and through his lunch hours. With eleven books (and several awards), he has been productive, but I count only 109 poems saved, fewer than three per year. Zimmer’s abiding sense of flexibility and ease is more than matched by a severe notion of value. Within those 109, however, we find a wonderful plenitude. We find his poems of joy—heaven imagined as the extended company of musicians, ballplayers, and poets, and as being “thankful for eternity” even after experiencing a few long afternoons of it; heaven on earth imagined as jamming with Duke Ellington and coming off, to Ellington, as a “most astonishing ofay”; and the heaven of our deep, ancestral life in which Zimmer, as primordial man, roughly, joyously, and dangerously engenders the species. We find his poems of Wanda—another choice name from the end of the alphabet—and his less frequent, and more tender, verses to Suzanne, “my enzymes, my yeast, / All the things that make my cork go pop.” In another poem, the slightest thought of losing her makes his “knuckles / Turn white like worried children,” a wonderfully precise image, surprising, evocative, and in no way overstated. There’s his wonderful ode to work, work as being, work as art, work as prayer; work that interrupts the work of writing and is welcomed nevertheless. There’s his small collection of Zimmer shuffle-stepping with the classics—“A Zimmershire Lad,” “Zumer Is Icumen In,” “Leaves of Zimmer,” and “Robyn Hode and Maid Wanda,” in which, in rambunctious mock Middle English, Robyn lives to sink many a shaft in a Maid Wanda he discovers in the Greenwood.

Then there are other poems much more troubled and grim. “Zimmer Loathing the Gentry,” for example, who “protect their names like hymens . . . suck their names like thumbs.” Or Zimmer’s “Explanation,” actually his father’s, who fought off his final mugging by “tubes and wires” in the hospital by writing out in “his clearest / Most commanding hand, ‘I am dead.’” Or the poem about witnessing atomic tests and

of a sergeant moved to recall slaughtering pigs, how from time to time that man's father would call his small crew away from pigs rolling in their own blood, as if "tryin' to get it back inside their skins," and retire to the barn for a drink of well water and a rest in the shade, so the boys wouldn't experience "Blood Lock," the poem's title:

It can turn your soul to red.
It's a thing that,
If it ever gets ahold of you,
Makes you want to go on killin' forever.

Characteristically, Zimmer lets the juxtaposition of one event upon the other make all his observation.

My impulse is to cite poem after poem since so many embody effective and memorable stories. So just one more, from the new poems. "Passage" comes to six stanzas, two quatrains and four tercets. Its quatrains are the first and fifth stanzas, setting and resetting the scene in which Zimmer, as a boy, encounters a trouble and reacts to it. The trouble is another small human drama, easily overlooked, of an old Black couple on the sidewalk grieving for their dog, just killed by a car. The boy cannot express the empathy he feels. He can only be an intrusion and summon his inappropriate observation, saying, to the man, "You'll have to get her another dog."

That's when the second quatrain extends the moment through which we wait for the man's response. The moment fills with the "throb / of her weeping," with "traffic / sucking wind on the oily street," with the bones of the speaker growing "brittle," until,

At last the man drew his answer
heavily up from the deep, "That's all right,
You go along," he said. "It's our sadness."

In one small, fine moment, that elegantly minded man sympathizes with the boy's clumsy attempt at sympathy and so makes his sadness "ours," too, after all.

—D.H.