

A Poet's Voice

Dave Margoshes

Dave Margoshes is a Saskatoon-area writer whose work has appeared widely in Canadian literary magazines and anthologies. He's published over a dozen books – the most recent, *Dimensions of an Orchard*, won the Saskatchewan Book Awards' Poetry Prize in 2010; *The Horse Knows the Way* was short-listed for that award the previous year. His poetry has won a number of other awards, including the Stephen Leacock Prize for Poetry in 1996. A collection of linked short stories, *A Book of Great Worth*, will be published this spring.

Author's Statement Poetry is a way of talking to myself – and through myself, to the world. (It's ironic, of course, since so much of the world seems to ignore poetry except in the form of song lyrics and greeting card verse.) My fiction writing is entirely different – there, I'm focused on the story I'm telling. Poetry is a way of slowing down, exploring inner worlds, reconsidering. You hold a well-crafted poem to your ear, and you hear the breath of the universe. And that's just it, as the American poet Louis Simpson put it: "Poetry isn't writing, not really. It's the art of listening."

Modern life

The egg, she is a lonely traveler.
Will she be a chicken? No thank you,
she says. Ah, a meal then! Scrambled, fried,
poached...? No thank you again, if it's all
the same to you. The egg is very polite. She
declines as well omelet, soufflé, quiche,
more elegant but just as fatal. An egg
can't be too careful. An egg must think
of all possibilities, examine her options,
take no sides. An egg is faced with her past
in all directions, likewise her future. Yet
an egg must consider her future. It can be
confusing. An egg must go with the flow,
roll with the punches, but avoid the bumps.
The one thing she need not do is watch
her diet, her shape is one thing the egg has
little care for. She is too self-possessed
for that, too self-contained. She appreciates
the admiring glances she gets, resents those
who are disrespectful. She refrains from making
obvious puns. She longs to be held, cool
and grave, in the palm of her lover's hand,
to be rolled along the soft skin of his cheek.
She has hardened her own skin but her heart
can be broken.

Dreams of a Snowy Evening

The flea dreams of the dog, the dog
of the hearth and fire. The fire dreams
of winds rushing down the chimney, seducing
it into something greater than itself.
Its nightmare is rain. The chimney dreams
of both the sweep and the firm hand
of the mason, the two great loves
of her blackened life. The sweep dreams
of his broom, the mason, fitfully, of the stone
he could not lift. The sculptor too dreams
of that stone, of the shape he would make
of it if only he could. The stone dreams
of rain, the rain of moss, the moss of fire,
and round we go again, fire, hearth, dog,
flea. All the while, the snow falls gingerly,
wide awake.

Circus vision

The eye of the owl sees in all directions
at once. It sees the death of the mouse,
sees its own death but doesn't blink, wise
beyond its years. The eye of the hawk is
more focused, tunnel vision in one exquisite
gesture, it sees neither the post nor the road
yet knows its whereabouts with precision
and grace, humbled. The eye of the toad
is a circus, three rings at a time, it sees
the owl with one, the hawk with the other,
a collision course.

Seasons

Summer was months ago but it encores
in this bowl of raspberries in syrup,
so sweet, so red, right from the cellar jars,
seeds brittle in my teeth. Corn too, nuggets
of August, shivery beans and beets
in vinegar bath, honey in my tea
from summer's bees long after the hives
succumbed to snow. The seasons confound
us here, circling back upon themselves,
showing us the way to find our selves.

The Quilt

My grandmother plucks down from her geese
with fingers coarsened by kitchen and field,
the barns, a snowstorm of down corseted
into thick ticking, sewed tight against
the long journey to come.

She has no time to teach her children,
that's dreamers' work for the beggars
at the door, former students of her husband,
fled to America. Bread and milk, eggs
and chicken, children cannot live on words,
fare for the passage.

A century later the quilt lies on my bed,
heavy as history.

Religion

The sparrows' eye is on the main chance.
And there is no end to the sparrow.
Her species are many and varied,
her thirst unquenchable. Look,
the trees are filled with sparrows
recreating the sounds of Babel,
filling the air with a species of joy.
In winter no less than in summer,
of sparrows there is no end. That thought
may be all the religion you need.

At the National Yiddish Book Center

We go to Amherst to visit the Dickinson home
and find it closed, not yet 5 on a hot summer day
but already the small parking lot is deserted,
looking more in its frilly maple coat like something
from Frost than Emily. There is a page
in the guidebook about a Yiddish library
at the nearby college, and so that the trip should
not be a waste, we drive over to take a look.
The building hulks against its landscape all shoulders
and shrug and splintery wood, designed, we read,
to simulate a *shtetl*, one of those Jewish villages
wiped off the Eastern European map by war
and design. Inside, the notion of a library
is more easy to accept, artful displays behind glass
and a cavernous sunken room filled with books,
but it's finding that they have a copy
of my grandfather's autobiography that
brings the place into sharp focus. I have a copy
myself, of course, on a high shelf at home,
but I haven't held it in my hands in years.
It's in Yiddish, of course, and I can't read it,
its story as opaque to me as the sheet
of polished steel behind the glass of a mirror.
But here, standing in the stacks inhaling dust,
when I crack it open I'm struck by how much
the old man whose photo fills the title page
looks just like my father did when he died,
though my father is as long dead now as *his* father
was then, the ribbons tying us all together
like the bookmark of frayed cloth sewn
into the binding turning back on themselves,
unraveling. I am standing in a tunnel formed
by ceiling-high racks of books all written
in a language almost as dead as my father, his father
and all their fathers and grandfathers before them,
nothing Emily Dickinson could have understood
though her hymns rang with the same cadences,
and yet there is a murmur in my ear, a whispering
that is familiar, a surging of blood.