

Len Krisak's *Even As We Speak*

A Review, January 31, 2002

"So far as I'm concerned," said J. V. Cunningham, "poetry is metrical writing. If it's anything else, I don't know what it is." As general acceptance of Cunningham's definition would disqualify a majority of contemporary poets, let us insist that his definition is inadequate, that no good can come of it--

But here is one of the remnant of whom it could be said, 'He is a poet,' even if Cunningham's definition applied. Len Krisak's poetry is metrical writing, in form. The cover of *Even As We Speak* shows a picture of Roman columns standing in a field of dry grasses and tall, leafless trees, against a white sky. "Even as we speak," the picture tells us, "time wears away the old forms." The picture is beautiful in its evocation of time past and passing, with its faint promise of renewal in the slender young trees.

Turning the cover and entering the poems themselves, the reader finds the old forms made new again. Here are sonnets, quatrains, rondeaus, rhymed couplets, a ballade... Is the reader so indoctrinated with prevailing opinion as to consider these forms outdated, to assume that the poet who writes in form must choose tired themes, clichéd expression, worn-out material? Only look at the titles of Krisak's poems: "Dying at a Resort," "Ocean Kayakers in the Morning," "High School Trench Coat..." Those are not Tennyson's subjects.

"Father / Shaving / Mirror," perhaps the most masterful of the poems in this volume, may be read as a correction to the erroneous view that form limits expression. The act of shaving is a form of human behavior that persists because we have arrived at no better way of removing the bristles from our faces. It takes on ritual significance because boys do not shave and men do. The ritual aspect of shaving implies a kind of passage, a handing down of the old ways, a growing into them. Growing older, the poet sees in his own reflection the image of the father he remembers.

 "...from here on in, I'll cut
 Not just my own, but someone else's cheek:
 That stubbled cheek I kissed when I was eight.
 Its beard is mine now."

It is the very "formality" of the act of shaving, its series of repeated gestures the same for the son as for his father before him, that allows this insight into what is communicated from one generation to the next. We are reminded that one's true place in human society is (in Burke's phrase) "among the dead, the living, and those yet unborn--the community of souls." Krisak writes, "We greet / The day in one another, realize / Our more-than-homely task..." How more-than-homely is the task of shaving, seen in this light, as form. The poem, of course, is written in form, in rhymed quatrains: thus its heightened expression.

Krisak's acknowledgement of what a man inherits, especially if that man be a poet, is not limited to the one poem. The volume includes poems dedicated to three contemporary poets who write traditionalist verse, A. M. Juster, Timothy Steele, and Richard Wilbur. At its

front is a dedication to a fourth master-poet and mentor, Rhina Espaillat. Krisak is a poet who does not take for granted the gift that makes him a poet, nor the many gifts of example or encouragement received along the way. Even *As We Speak* is a book replete with gratitude. Krisak's respect for the craft of poetry, and for those who are skilled in that craft, is evident in everything he does, and he does so much: he is a true servant of the Muse, as his many fine translations included in this volume attest. Petrarch, Horace, Akhmatova, and others benefit by his literary energy. Even Samuel Johnson, that master of the English language, gets help from Len Krisak, as one of his poems written in Latin is translated here.

Begin there, on page 62, with the translation of Johnson's Latin poem, "Skia." No one will need suggest that you then begin again, at the beginning.