

Very Far North, by Timothy Murphy
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Though Robert Penn Warren taught fiction at Yale in the early seventies, the first American poet laureate did have at least one poetry student, the young Timothy Murphy. Warren, whose own freshman teacher at Vanderbilt had him memorize three thousand lines of poetry, taught by a similar method. Murphy estimates that he learned 30,000 lines: the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. Getting verses by heart is important personal business, and Murphy has profited greatly from it. Able to recite extended passages of Beowulf, both in translation and in the original Anglo-Saxon, Murphy is a mesmerizing “reader” of his own poetry as well, largely because he does not read at all, but engages his audience entirely, without ever glancing down at the written page, simply saying his poems aloud as though across a kitchen table, eye to eye with his listeners.

It seems Murphy found his ideal teacher in Robert Penn Warren. Besides the discipline of memory, the agrarian master-poet made another gift to his student. He gave him this advice, which Murphy quotes as often as he has the opportunity: “Go home, boy. Sink your toes in that rich soil and grow some roots.”

Home, for Tim Murphy, was then and still is the American midwest. Again he took his teacher’s advice and set about trying to grow —not roots, precisely— but wheat, corn, soybeans, apples, pigs... Judson Jerome has famously remarked that poetry and zucchini are the two most overproduced commodities in America. Anyone who actually tries to make a living from the soil soon finds out what his crops will bring. He’s not likely to stick with something that anyone can produce at home (like careless free verse), nor, as Murphy will tell you, with a government-subsidized commodity like wheat, corn, or soybeans (or careless free verse). Trying various crops and livestock, he met with spectacular success and became intimate with spectacular failure. He ran up nearly enough debt to qualify for an IMF loan; yet his company, Bell Farms, now produces 1,200,000 pigs, or roughly one pound of pork for every citizen of the United States. Can another American poet put together a resumé like Murphy’s?

Success and failure are sun and rain to the kind of “roots” Warren wanted to see nourished, roots that take a good long while to grow. A quarter century passed before Murphy published his first book of poems, *The Deed of Gift*, from Story Line Press. Two years later the Ohio University Press brought out *Set the Ploughshare Deep*, a memoir in prose and poetry. Some of the poems included in that memoir re-appear here in Murphy’s second full-length collection of poetry, *Very Far North*.

Ironically, this distinctly American book —rooted in the nation’s heartland— has found its publisher in England. Such things have happened before. Robert Frost, from whose verse the phrase “very far north” is drawn, had his first book published in England. But this is not Tim Murphy’s first book and it is disheartening to think that no American publisher could be found for it. The explanation is simple, of course. Story Line Press, which published Murphy’s first book, was in financial straits and so backlisted that his second book would never have appeared, had he stayed with them. Murphy himself takes a bright view of getting published overseas: “I wanted to reach a

new audience.”

Well, the Waywiser Press of London did a nice job. Handsomely designed by Philip Hoy, the book is, first of all, a beautiful object. It would not be unfair to judge this one by its cover, though, indeed, if it were only a wire-bound manuscript, it would still be a volume like those the Emperor Hui Tzung grieved to lose when the Mongol hoards of Genghis Kahn routed his armies, as Murphy relates in his poem, “The Collector.”

Li Po’s and Tu Fu’s deathless poetry—
pilfered by gibbering barbarians.

Today, scribbling barbarians present more of a threat to deathless poetry than do the gibbering kind, who are (we hope) less likely to be grant-funded. Murphy’s poetry is both independent and classical. The one virtue requires the other. His attention to meter and form fly in the face of contemporary attitudes about such matters. Only glance at a poem by this year’s poet laureate, titled “Sonnet,” which makes a mockery of the form:

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
and after this one just a dozen
to launch a little ship on love’s storm-tossed seas,
then only ten left like rows of beans.
How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
and insist the iambic bongos must be played
and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines...

You get the drift. And Billy Collins, with his humor and accessibility, is by no means the worst offender against the muse. Collins at least cares enough about form to disparage it.

But compare his “Sonnet” to one included in *Very Far North*:

Unposted

Abandoned where the grass grew lank and damp,
the antiquated grain drill seemed a toy
some Lilliputian farmer might employ
to plant a field small as a stamp.

Kelly opened a hopper filled with seed
nutty and sweet as Wheaties in the bag.
Where were the ploughman and his plodding nag
to run that good grain through the metered feed?

Flushed from a pigweed patch, a pheasant sailed
over the leafless tree row flecked with red
where shrunken apples hung unharvested
or fallen to the stubble, lay impaled.

Squinting into the distance, Kelly said
"It was the farmer, not the seed what failed."

Murphy recognizes the grain drill as antiquated. The sonnet is not. The form that in Collins' estimation is too stiff and unmaleable for use, Murphy adapts to suit himself. He skillfully blends elements of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet to great expressive purpose. At first glance, "Unposted" has the appearance of a Shakespearean sonnet: three quatrains build one upon the other to make the poet's argument, the gist of which is driven home in the poem's two closing lines. But the quatrain in a sonnet by Shakespeare would rhyme a b a b. The brace-rhyme quatrains of "Unposted" are associated with the Petrarchan sonnet. Here they work well with the image of "a field as small as a postage stamp," hemmed in and shrinking still, uncultivated, with weeds encroaching on every side. And while the closing lines tie up the poem as nicely as a Shakespearean couplet would, they do not in fact form a couplet. They share the rhyme-sounds of the third quatrain, so that, to the ear, the final six lines of the poem form one unit, the Petrarchan sestet. To the sense, those six lines are comprised of two separate units, the sonnet's final quatrain and two lines that function very like a closing couplet. This tension results in great emphasis on the last line of the poem, in which both sestet and would-be couplet are resolved.

That final line is, not incidentally, a line the poet attributes to another speaker. Not Tim Murphy but his friend Kelly stands for the applause at the close of the poem. Therein lies a hint of Murphy's typical poetic practice, and the secret of his success in these poems.

What is it that Murphy is doing that other poets are not? His mastery of meter and rhyme is not the whole of it. It goes beyond even the song-like quality of his typically short lines. (He considers a line of pentameter a long line: even two of the six sonnets in this collection are written in tetrameter.) It has to do with humor, with humility, with bringing other people's voices into the poem, not only on occasion, but time and again. A poem called "Country Voices" —whose title spells out Murphy's poetic enterprise— quotes a "master farmer:"

The picker took my fingers
to fertilize this land.
Only his green thumb lingers.
I shake his other hand.

In another section of the same poem, the farmer-poet frets about the falling price of corn.

Partner, I asked, How have we sinned?
Greed in some former life?
Kelly pondered, and then he grinned,
I'd hafta ask the wife.

Clearly, Murphy's poems typically begin in delight, a delight in the folksy phrases of the men and women who populate his rural community. Their language lingers on the

ear and in the air, become as much a part of place as the tractor and the plough. "Dakota Greetings" quotes "a frosted sign in a frozen ditch;" "The Last Sodbusters" a pamphlet circa 1907. "The Honey Wagon repeats a joke rendered a proverb by general "common sense. / You can't fertilize a field / by farting through the fence."

The words his grandmother Tessie spoke to him early on especially resonate to Murphy's ear. We learn from his earlier memoir, *Set the Ploughshare Deep*, that Tessie was an extraordinary woman, who "took degrees in English and history, unheard-of credentials for a farm-girl in 1912." She taught English to the German-speaking youths "in a hamlet near the Canadian border." But her own English was sprinkled with Scottish and Gaelic words, yearne and bairne and ferlie. Murphy associates the music of those words with the music of Robert Burns—perhaps the greatest influence on his own poetry—whose songs he first hear Tessie sing:

Tessie's Talk

She called our county drain The Burn
when I was wee and she was worn.
At the field's edge she built a cairn:
"Rags on a scarecrow ward the corn."

While darning socks with worsted yearne
or milching coos in a hip-roofed barn,
she sang Burns to a jug-eared bairn.
A ferlie whirled in her butter churn.

The hallmark of a poem by Tim Murphy is that we are likely to hear in it some voice other than Murphy's own. Indeed, in a poem called "Boom and Bust," the poet allows himself one line only, and that only to introduce the next speaker:

Boom and Bust

An old man with a wink:
"I struck it rich three times.
Whenever I was broke
bellhops tipped their caps,
beggars took my dimes
and maitre d's, our wraps.
What did my Ida lack?
In fat years and in lean,
I had good scotch to drink,
Cuban cigars to smoke,
and fine wool on my back.
So what does money mean?"

It is as though Murphy has designated his time at the podium as "open mike time," except that everyone who speaks has access to his poetic skill, which is put at the service of the community, like a country doctor's. Murphy has revived an older notion of the poet's role in society, and has chosen to live by it. All the most admirable qualities in his

work are branches of one tree: his respect for tradition, form, meter and rhyme; his sense of humor; his ear for what people say; and a humility that knows the true worth of poetry in relation to other things of worth, neither overestimating—

I dispute the notion
that horses are poetry—
it's not fair to the horse ("Horses for My Father")

—nor underestimating that worth.

The Dead Poet

At last the path runs straight
from his hovel to the skies
and the bolted postern gate
of the Western Paradise
where seven times seven
immortals judge a throng,
admitting some to heaven
for the pittance of a song.

All of these qualities are rooted in an accurate perception of the poet's role in society, and by society I mean what Russell Kirk (paraphrasing Edmund Burke) defined as "a community of souls, joining the dead, the living, and those yet unborn." He adds, "It coheres through what Aristotle called friendship and Christians call love of neighbor."

In a rural neighborhood—or in a nation— recognized as an extension of the "community of souls," words do resonate from one generation to the next. The words of a true poet, like Tim Murphy, gain in authority. It is unfortunate that, in the least attractive poem in this volume, "The Making of an Artist," the poet appears unclear that both word and action can effect awful consequence.

The Making of an Artist

After the War, an unnamed Oxford don,
a soldier then, seduced a Roman boy
in a brief flurry of paedophilic joy,
but woke one day to find his minion gone.

The don, shamed by his momentary rage,
consoled himself with academic fame,
and publishing his monograph, became
the foremost lepidopterist of his age.

Years later, at a gathering in France,
the don spotted a face he surely knew
and blurted: "Franco, darling! Is it you?"
The great director looked at him askance:

“I’m sorry, but your name has slipped my mind.
There were so many, and they were all so kind.”

Again, Murphy has adapted the sonnet form to his purpose. But what is his purpose in writing the poem? No man’s art will convince this reader that paedophilia is perhaps not such a bad thing after all, as this poem would seem to imply.

No, the reader is assured, you’re getting it wrong: the director, Zeffirelli, was sixteen and the soldier nineteen when they were together, not exactly child-abuse. But that clarification depends on background the poem does not provide. The poem employs the adjective “paedophilic,” and how should the reader know that here the word doesn’t mean what it usually means? This is a poem that has nothing to do with abhorrent, criminal behavior (Why is the don even “shamed”?), but whatever charm the poem may have is lost by the time we’ve got it figured out. Surely the one demand a reader can justifiably make of a poet is that he choose his words well.

It matters, especially in a book like *Very Far North*, whose poems are likely to stay in the language a good long time. Little else is there to criticize in this extraordinary book, though the reader might do well to skip the last two poems in it, both of them Buddhist meditations. Murphy is no Milarepa, and lovers of poetry should be glad for that. Though the inner peace promised by Eastern philosophy may have a healthy appeal to the hard-drinking, chain-smoking venture capitalist, that philosophy’s ideal of detachment is utterly at odds with his poetic enterprise. *Very Far North* celebrates above all our ties to the earth and to each other. Murphy’s poems are running over with friendship and love of neighbor. It is a friendship extended to the dead: witness an entire section, “Red Like Him,” in honor of Robert Penn Warren and other cherished mentors, including the timeless Tessie and the poet’s father, for whom he gathers a sequence of profoundly beautiful lyrics under the title, “Horses for My Father.”

VIII. Transformation

The old stallion dies.
Our roan no longer roams
beneath our outsized skies.
In a gorge loud with streams
beyond the Great Divide,
an eagle blinds a hare,
rips the heart from its side,
and bears it to his lair.

It is a friendship extended as well to those yet unborn: “The Steward” bequeaths to future generations his “fields where the cocks are crowing / and his green sons, growing.” And it is an energetic, vital love of neighbor, a hearty celebration of the living, including even the animals and the fields. No wonder there is such laughter in this company. No wonder so many voices have a say.

