

SCHUYLKILL COUNTY by Louis McKee. Wampeter Press, 1982. 59 pp., \$4.95.

The 45 poems in Louis McKee's (first) collection, *Schuylkill County*, cover a fair amount of emotional ground: loss, memory, love, to name but three places that are solid ground for the poet. There's also the occasional literary anecdote (I'm thinking of a poignant piece about being in a bar and insisting everyone drink to James Wright; also, an ironic set of observations which begins with the line: "What set Roethke's bear to dancing?"). In addition, the poet registers some philosophic observations of sorts in a number of disturbingly simple poems ("Quarrels," "Song," and "Words, An Argument") that point to the possible influence of Spanish or Chinese poetry. (I could be wrong.) Read cover to cover, preferably three or four times, *Schuylkill County* succeeds in being stirring, evocative, artful (without being arty) and well-proportioned.

First books are so often a grab-bag of the good, the bad and the just plain unpublishable that picking up one like this - which is handsomely packaged to boot -- one has to be immediately prejudiced by its integrity; by the fact that everything that's here belongs here.

But there's more to admire in this book than its integrity. Start with the idea that a poem ought to say something instead of being pretty little verbal ornament, a precious intellectual minature or an ass-in-the-air glot of scholarly posturing and you can agree that everything here works on the most fundamental level. That is: these are statements about life and living. They're delineated in a simple, straightforward way (in other words, without a lot of posing or vulgarity). And sometimes they communicate something the mind has a hard time laying to rest. The latter is an essential condition for calling a poem or poems good.

The first piece in *Schuylkill County* is called "A Matter of Style," and it's appropriately titled. (It's also a fine piece.) "The poem should begin/ with the poet/standing across the street/and under a tree..." What we're talking about here is the idea of a poem - any poem - beginning in a need, or a feeling, that attaches itself to an object or expresses itself in a situation. (In this case, a man standing outside a woman's window.) In effect, the poem is an aesthetic definition of poetry, and it says that poetry is an attempt to give weight to feelings through ideas and their formal expression, to shape the intangible. What we must understand about a poem, states the poet, is that "By the time it reaches/its final lines/no one should be left in doubt..."

But that idea (that the poem should leave no doubt about its intention) is also a promise, and one that's fulfilled. None of the poems suffers from obscurity. Beyond anything else, they're clear, concise, honest and direct. Moreover, some of them are about the sorts of things poems just usually aren't about. In "The Short Cut," for example, three boys dare each other to take a shortcut through a graveyard.

The poem's speaker is ever mindful that the dead at any moment may topple their tombstones and "rise up to heaven/to stand before the Lord." Here an idea that might not tempt too many poets becomes a marvelously crisp piece that evokes the sway of superstition in childhood from the point of view of the adult looking back, and this in 44 lines. McKee's material is usually interesting, and never gets out of hand.

Another example of the tough subject handled adroitly is "Crosstown Charades," where the poem's speaker spots someone on the subway with whom he's had an affair. She pretends to ignore him, of course (though finally surrenders a smile and a "cryptic kiss"), whereby both sink back "into the graffitied walls/and tarpaulin of blank stares..." McKee handles sensitive subjects with deftness.

But brevity is obviously the password here. Where with some poets, brevity becomes obsessive to the point where the resultant poems are stilted or incomprehensible for demanding the reader know what the poet thinks he knows; here brevity lends the material grace. An example is the poem, "Song," (I'm reminded of the innumerable Alberti poems titled "Cancion" or "Song" in Spanish), which is brief enough - and certainly worthy enough - to be quoted in full:

When you lie back, your head
tilted like that, your hair
hanging loose, away from your neck,
shaking it out over the grass,
yes, like that,

all of those who have ever loved you
stir, their thoughts cloud
for that moment. The air shivers
with a soft chill like music.
You sing softly under your breath.

Here one simple idea, simply presented, hints at all the manifold complexity of human love. To pack immediacy ("yes, like that,"), irony ("You sing softly under your breath.") and the romantic notion of love as a force rather than the emotional property of any one person ("all of those who ever loved you/stir") into ten short lines, or - if you like - 56 words, takes skill, talent and a hell of a lot of practice.

The other short pieces - "Quarrels" or "Words, An Argument" - are also built around a relatively simple idea which is presented in such a way as to open it up like a bud; having the effect, almost, of old Chinese poetry (which did this beautifully). "Quarrels," for example, consists of these lines: "Quarrels are in us/like flies, their noise/rolled up into a roar;/we must open our mouths."

That *is* the poem; as many words as can roll off the tongue in 15 or so seconds. Yet the language is able to suggest any number of variations on the theme that we vent our anger on other people as if they were inanimate objects: that this flows from the internally contradictory part of ourselves, that it's compulsive, etc. The flies suggest decay, frustration, grit, heat, etc. Four lines can generate an hour's mediation. The effect of compressing ideas into such short lyrics is to give them resilience and durability.

There are poems in *Schuylkill County* that get so close to the nature of experience that they're worth re-reading any number of times. I'm talking about "Final Exam," "The Literary Saloon," "Finding the Rivers" and the title poem, "Schuylkill County."

This book comes off as a solid achievement; one in which the poems result from a fusion of craft, intuition, a familiarity with state-of-the-art poetry and the ability to see outside oneself that any poet has to have before he or she can write poems like these.

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