

WINTER OYSTERS, by Brendan Galvin. University of Georgia Press, 1983. 75 pp. Paper \$5.95.

Someone is always "awake on the outskirts" in Brendan Galvin's poems, and that someone is naturally the poet, who with discerning eye frequents familiar modern poetic locales: from compost heap to marsh, dump, woodpile, and mudflat. It is not surprising to find in *Winter Oysters* poems entitled "A Few Words from the Weeds" and "Becoming a Dump Keeper," for ever since *No Time For Good Reasons* (1974), his first of four books, Galvin's poetry has consistently reflected a Whitman-like fascination with

the rights of them the others are down upon,  
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,  
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Of course, such an interest is practically a nerve-tic of twentieth-century poetry. After all, Eliot's "Preludes," with its "grimy scraps" and "vacant lots" is five years more distant to us today than the 1855 "Song of Myself" was to Eliot in 1917. And William Carlos Williams at about the same time was praising "the old man who goes about/gathering dog-lime" from the gutters of New Jersey.

I do not intend to demean Galvin's work by stressing its participation in the lengthening modern tradition of anti-poetry. Nor am I particularly interested in the sort of dogged influence-hunting brought to such high art by Harold Bloom ("that bloodhound of unease," in Sydney Lea's memorable phrase). Rather, I hope to define what makes Galvin's poetry stand out from the crowd of conventional misfits and rubbish-heap naturalists who jostle for space in our bookstores and periodicals. (In doing so, I oversimplify his book, which has more variety than I have space to discuss. I focus on what may be his best mode, poetry concerning our uneasy love of the natural world.) Moreover, while citing Whitman's influence upon any American poet is a little like noting the rain's influence upon a dandelion, I want to argue that Galvin shows affinity for Whitman in several particularly fruitful respects.

Galvin, who writes not from "fish-shape Paumanok" but from and of his native Cape Cod ("this wrist of Massachusetts"), pays as much attention to the natural world as Whitman did, which is a great deal. More important, though, his fascination is equally with the sound of his own voice mediating between the human and the nonhuman. Language itself is a natural miracle, as Whitman well knew. In "The Mockingbird," Galvin notes first the nervy comedy of the mockingbird's performance:

Far into the moonlight he tries  
to recall his own song,  
but a whippoorwill  
floats out three clear notes  
wobbly and clear as bubbles,  
so he corrects them for her,  
melding them with a child's  
creaky swing, but erases  
that line, and takes a new tack  
from a siren on route 17,  
then drops to a cowbird  
like water poured into water.

This mockingbird ("the American mimic, singing in the Great Dismal Swamp," in Whitman's "Our Old Feuillage") is transparently an emblem of the poet-as-ventriloquist, whose mockery is as much directed at himself as anyone. Still, the poet claims the bird's pride along with its mockery, as the next lines inform us: "This business of getting/the world right/isn't for dilettantes." And this business certainly isn't for those who cannot see the simultaneous absurdity of the project, "going phrase/by phrase over hills," commanding the world by definition: "waiting at cedar posts/to teach killdeer/to pronounce their own names better."

The poem concludes with a sleepless woman, "someone awake on the outskirts," hearing in the bird's mimicry an entire marching band, in good-natured consolation for her insomnia. With "sun living on brass horns" and "an easy, foot-saving march/as the ensemble passes,/air in its wake/banged to a bass difference," the poet finds an apt though winsome analogy for poetry's playful importance, its "essential gaudiness," in Stevens's phrase. Similarly, in "Lying to Fall

Warblers," "Dog Love," and "Owl-Struck," we find the poet productively ill-at-ease in facing down the otherness of the natural world. What is notable about these poems is that Galvin insists equally upon the literal and figurative values of his words; his frequently strained metaphors always serve to deepen rather than evade his thematic concerns. This is one measure of what a poet can learn from Whitman.

In Whitman we never forget that a poem is a performance; even when he presents us exhaustively with the catalogue of our world, we know that the gift is first of all language itself. Thus, as Randall Jarrell noted in his famous essay, "Some Lines From Whitman," even Whitman's weakest lines are full of "unusually absurd...really ingeniously bad language." Consider, for example, this typical list of Whitman's poetic and bodily afflictions, so strange and clumsily detailed that they are almost poignant: "querilities,/Ungracious glooms, aches, lethargy, constipation, whimpering ennui/May filter in my daily songs." Such a language-drunk poet is clearly a genius, even here, of high showmanship and courage.

Galvin is never quite so drunk (or so dreadful), but he does manage to redeem even his occasional lapses of taste with engaging performance. In "A Double-Ended Dory," for instance, we find the speaker stealing a boat from "in front of the Chowder House," where it had rested full of zinnias, "sad as a thoroughbred pointer/wearing a Christmas bow." (The oddball simile is a Galvin trademark.) But we may never understand, the narrator needlessly informs us, why he is rescuing the dory from its tourist-trap embarrassment, for we poor readers may "never [have] put offshore/in anything but a hull like tupperware." In fact, we may wince at such aggressive sentimentality; even so, the poem is rich with both self-conscious hijinks (like that Marianne Mooreish "thoroughbred pointer") and description so plain and clear it is eloquent:

Once she was  
tight as a pod, clinker-built  
for cod-lining on the Banks:  
the deeper the fish in her bins,  
the surer she sat two men  
in the troughs between waves.

Like Whitman, also, Galvin is a poet rich in humor, though not essentially a comic writer. Anyone who has taught Whitman has probably noticed how difficult it is to get students even to *see* Whitman's humor, much less take its measure. (Jarrell's essay mentioned above is instructive on this issue too.) Even more difficult to put across is the notion that a poem's humor does not necessarily invalidate its serious themes, if the balancing act is skillful enough.

Galvin at his best avoids taking himself too solemnly, without succumbing to the arid irony which is our most persistent vice. And he takes the language itself, and its dangers, very seriously indeed. Consider "The Grackles," which may seem at first a predictably frivolous hymn to these unlovely pests, with "their failed storekeeper's eyes" and their feathers "steel-blue/and bronze, as though every bird/had been dipped in a lubricant/intended to soothe its cries into song." Yet the poem balances between opposing tones with seamless craft:

All day they split  
the gross contents of pods, twangling  
like so many cash drawers springing open,

hoarding all they could carry  
for their long haul toward the evening's  
vast collision, where they would provide  
the final clatter of chrome.

Grackles are and are not the subject, of course, just as the poem both enacts and gently mocks its own obsession with description. The subject, as often in Galvin, is more profoundly the human longing for order and meaning as it engages the world's seductive chaos: how may the world be fairly described? Yet to put it so baldly is to lose the poem's tone, its witty, self-reflexive exuberance of expression, which in no way undercuts the theme.

Indeed, it is always a long haul toward "evening's vast collision," which I take to be death, and it is always a journey undertaken with deeply mixed motives. Poem after poem in *Winter Oysters* spins out in this self-questioning yet confident way, utterly ambivalent about the world's hospitality, but with little doubt about the power of the word itself, even if the word is wrong, or the product of wishful thinking:

I have made all this up  
out of a crooked need  
to deepen truth:

the last Pamet Indian  
lies with his myths  
somewhere around here,

and taller than hog cranberry,  
in this pine shade beneath  
the notice of herbalists,  
Pipsissewa grows.

Its flower looks at the ground,  
so, in my version,  
it remembers. And when  
I slip a finger under its chin

and look it in the eye,  
someone muffled in me  
as in a quilt  
steps out saying her name.

Galvin is a noteworthy poet because, like Whitman, he convinces the reader that he cares equally about word and fact, about "imagination's wrong turns" and "the eon-by-eon endeavors of this world," which imagination can never quite encompass. Like Whitman also, he conveys infectious pleasure at both seeing and saying.

— David Graham

