

implicit in Anderson's 'A man has to begin over and over,' in his explanation at the end of the story "Death in the Woods": "I am only explaining why I was dissatisfied then and have been ever since. I speak of that only that you may understand why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again."

— Angela Ball

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY. Mary Fell. Random House, 1984. 73 pp. Paper, \$8.95.

Mary Fell's first collection of poetry, *The Persistence of Memory* (one of the 1984 National Poetry Series volumes, selected by Madeline DeFrees), borrows its title from Salvador Dali's famous painting of melting clocks. Though its techniques and themes are less grotesque and fanciful than Dali's, the book does circle obsessively around the past and its survival into the present. Fell's heritage is working-class Irish, her hometown is Worcester, Massachusetts, and her poetry combines a bitter humor with love for the communion of talk.

"American Legion," for instance, begins with an epigraph presumably copied from a memorial plaque, a wry found-poem in itself: "To all veterans/of all wars/of the Main South Area." "All politics is local politics," Chicago's Mayor Daly was supposed to have said, and we can imagine Fell agreeing. For in "American Legion," a veteran of "all wars" is identified also as a veteran of a distinctive, pathetically localized place: "the Main South Area." His real war begins when he enters the Legion bar after a day's work, where he and his cronies "bathe their wounds/with stories each agrees to swallow," and where he "bends his elbow in slow salute/to himself and his fellow soldiers." There's nothing particularly novel about this scene, nor is Fell's descriptive language dazzling or intricate. She even alludes without irony to that cliché of bar-talk: emptied beer bottles as "dead soldiers." What's moving about this poem is Fell's scrupulous fidelity to reality—not to sentimental posturing or condescending glorification, but simply to the fact of this veteran's life, with "this pain near his heart/where something went in he can't wash out."

Fell's book is filled with such plain voices—her own and those of parents, neighbors, lovers, factory workers, and various figures from literature and history. Yet in the best sense, all voices become one. Fell is not a ventriloquist so much as a lyrical storyteller, whose skill it is to approach transparency: rarely do we feel she is showing off, employing a decorative rhetoric. To borrow Marianne Moore's phrase, her language is "plain American which cats and dogs can read."

Take one of Fell's most overtly political poems, "Picket Line in Autumn":

you've never been so much
in the world as now,
spending all daylight
and all night too outdoors,
going in circles like the world does,
though sometimes it seems
standing still, getting nowhere—

except you know your tired feet
are turning the earth
and someday the sun
will give itself up to you,
the leaves surrender—
you know they will, if
you keep on walking long enough.

I imagine a quick reading might find this poem thin and obvious, not to mention preachy. But look at those deft turns of feeling, from "going in circles" to "turning the earth" to "you know they will, if," in which that final "if" resonates with unsettling honesty. Consider how few empty gestures the poet allows herself in this poem, maintaining instead a risky starkness of vocabulary, metaphor, and imagery. The ideas here are hardly complicated, but the feelings are accurate and substantial. Here and in other strong poems, Fell keeps one eye always on the "diminished roads" she finds running "anywhere better than here"; thus, as a political poet, she chooses complexity of emotion rather than idea.

The best poem in the book is "The Triangle Fire," a ten-page sequence describing in various voices the 1911 fire which destroyed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York, killing 146 workers, mostly immigrant women. Here we find all of Fell's strengths: colloquial vividness, complexity of feeling, a tough-minded politics of local allegiance. The sequence begins with an ironic Sabbath prayer, "Havdallah":

Until each day is ours

let us pour
darkness in a dish
and set it on fire,
bless those who labor
as we pray, praise God
his holy name,
strike for the rest

—and concludes on Fell's Whitmanic identification with one of the nameless victims, "Cortege":

She is no one, the one I claim
as sister. When the familiar is tagged

and taken away, she remains.
I do not mourn her. I mourn no one.
I do not praise her. No one

is left to praise. Seventy years after
her death, I walk in March rain behind her.
She travels before me into the dark.

It's hard to imagine a plainer, more dignified elegy to all those who "travel before" us, down those ever-diminished roads of the past.

Several prose pieces explore what one calls "peasant life," the life of memory and its twists, set in Worcester, though it could be anywhere. In "The Practice," the family history takes place, appropriately, on "Winter Street," where "whole rooms blew away by

morning. Old aunts went on shopping trips and never returned. . . . My own mother disappeared one day into her bedclothes, thinking she was better off." This is the voice of a peasant indeed, for it has the resilient fatalism of those who have learned not to expect much, here blended with Fell's characteristic deadpan wit.

This is the voice, also, of the father in "The Prophecy," who tells, "as if it were funny . . . how neighborhood kids went out to search the tracks for coal, each lump a treasure." Fell continues, mimicking his laconic ways: "Though my father is a storyteller, he has little else to say." We are left to ponder how much ever does get said, how people must choose to take the world "as if it were funny," and how little else, finally, seems worth saying. In the face of these bleak realities, Mary Fell's book treasures each lump of unsayable feeling, and recalls for us its persistent fire.

— David Graham

WILLIAM DOUGLAS O'CONNOR: WALT WHITMAN'S CHOSEN KNIGHT. By Florence Bernstein Freedman. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985. pp. xiv + 368.

William Douglas O'Connor's significance in American literary history begins and ends with the fact that he was among the first, after Ralph Waldo Emerson, to recognize the radical departure in politics, poetics, and human relations that Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* represented. Unlike Emerson, O'Connor championed Whitman's cause without reservation or qualification for nearly 30 years, even through a personal quarrel that separated the two men for a decade. O'Connor's advocacy produced, among other articles, the first sustained critical appreciation of Whitman's life and work; entitled *The Good Gray Poet*, it fastened upon Whitman an identifying tag that—perhaps unfortunately—has stuck to him to this day.

Although thought by his contemporaries—and by his own modern champion, Florence Bernstein Freedman—to be a writer of great talent, O'Connor never produced the original work that might have made him famous and a figure of enduring interest in American literature.