

REFLECTIONS : IMAGES IN ANALYSIS

A Candle for My Birthday by Alastair Howard Robertson, 52 pp., (unbound mimeographed sheets), \$.45

It isn't that easy with poems to tell those made-up to look like poems from those that rise on some strong impulse from deep inside the poet. Some of Alastair Robertson's most impressive poems may strike first as works of fancy, not only deliberately composed, but too knowing about the effects they're to have on the reader. But there is no questioning the poet's seriousness nor his rhetorical command nor the range of his intellectual experience. This is not a collection to be dismissed in a glance. The most elaborate poems contain passages that are finely coloured and intense. The shorter poems are more casual for the most part, and in their brevity these come closer to realizing the ideal expressed by Robertson's Michaelangelo in what may well be the single most impressive poem of the collection:

If I took
any more away, there would be
no stone left . . . perhaps
all material is superfluous. Shift,
strike, shift, strike, the chips
pile, the stone is taken away
and I have burst the prison of the rock.
("The Carving of the Rondanini Pieta")

The writing, even in this poem, doesn't always cut this close. For myself, on a few readings, the poems that seem to carry the least weight of self-consciousness and most the sound of the poet himself speaking are such things as "I Am Not Sure What Else There Is" and "High Cold Gray Lonely Place." There are other lighter things that meet well their own demands and those other heavier things that require longer acquaintance for a fair assessment. The format of loose mimeographed sheets with the formality of the preliminary pages points to a seriousness in the enterprise somewhat at odds with itself. This incongruity is in keeping with the meeting of tones and attitudes in the poems, pointing to unresolved tensions perhaps between high aspirations and spontaneous overflows.

Robert Gibbs

The Link

The black jewel swung before Margaret's eyes, swaying on its thin gold chain, the pendulum of of a timeless clock. Swing - a star flecked night; swing - a dying ember; swing - a wild black eye; swing - a moon brushed pond; tock tock with the clock. Seeing nothing but black jewel, gold chain, scorching her eyes, grasping her mind, swing swing swing.

"He gave it to me," she said.

Margaret's outstretched hand held the gold chain in a nice grip. Her knuckles were white and rigid. It appeared the spirit had departed body and left behind only a statue. Nothing moved but the black jewel, swinging like a hanged madman.

"It is mine," she said.

Margaret's mind moved with the jewel. It went back to the past, moved to the present, swayed to and fro until past and present jumbled together into one hazy mesh. This is where Margaret lived. The jewel ruled her, and ruled her with an iron grip. A grip which had been repeated daily for twenty years. A grip as binding as the one which held it by its golden chain.

"He gave it to me," she said.

-dale estey

HIGH COLD GREY LONELY PLACE

I see it can be only now
that I am at last alone;
for years ago I saw this place
was one to which I'd come;
and I curse the seeds of prophecy
that flower so bitterly,
knowing also that there is no way
but that the seed will flower,
and was no way it would not flower
and the flower wither into fruit;
and I suppose I should rejoice
because my feet have been
so steadily upon the way
although I could not see.

I AM NOT SURE WHAT ELSE THERE IS

There I was, sitting on a park bench
talking as earnestly and finally to a girl
as if I were in love with her;

a sort of formal leave-taking
in a tiny park
perched above the river
while the freight-trains below
shunted in the noon-hour sun.

They were to alter the landscape there,
build on it; most likely have, by now;
it will undoubtedly improve it, but
the physical fabric of the past disintegrates,
and I am not sure what else there is.

The houses I have been happy in,
old, small, comfortable curious
dilapidated places, have
mostly been demolished; others,
cold, featureless, substantial stone
Victorian terraced rooming-houses
endured a month or two, are still standing.

I am not nostalgic, only obscurely
disturbed; I am not sure
what else there is, except
a sort of formal leave-taking;
I was coming here, and she going
to work in Marks and Spencer's in Newcastle.
There was the warm, serious talking of friends,
and nothing else; I have not seen her
since, nore heard of her, nor the place
which is probably altered.

Bird and Wing Together

And what you remember and what was lived and what you see in the parchment leaves that shape the forest of the future is only a bristle of tastes and touches, a burr of a thistle.

To you that would write in languages strange of limpid-eyed beauty, words that colour the tongue the redness of a rose and leave behind a shimmering drop of blood; to you who hold the rain-fed rivers in your hands and search for blackening roots to nourish; to you memory and breath shall be united.

... Caer, a sound of seas and many days of salt-crustured shores; a cry of anchors and vainful calls of men that rend the wait of waves; the weight of clouds like white skirts that sweep the sands with tears.

A monument of faith, a foggy-windowed home of deaths long lived, each green-grown stone a face of autumn eyes and misting hair, a wind-molded door, the gate to fading voices.

... Oisin, a farmer's word, a damp and land-held morning; a prayer into the grey-footed storm; the near of shadows groping through the smoke-scented heavens.

And you have dropped your head upon the sworded altars of reason, and the liquid airs of throated speech are grown rock-tortured in the streams of passing.

Sheelagh Russell

