



Review: What could easily break but didn't

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InReview

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A paean is a song or hymn of praise, joyous in its tribute to another person or idea. It also well-sums the voice and tone of Pittsburgh poet Michael Simms' latest collection, "Jubal Rising," where the speaker embraces and sings to those small moments that bring him pause — the washing of turnip greens, observing a skateboarder maneuvering through the landscape of Downtown, his dog Josie facing "each day with the thrill of play."

The poetry here lingers, like a song about keeping faith by overcoming life's trials, it's refrain a throughline that sounds to me like the comforting funk of Motown's Rare Earth when they sing "I just want to celebrate, yeah, yeah, Another day of living." That's no dig toward Simms, best known for his newsletter, Vox Populi.

Instead, "Jubal's Rising" shines a light inward, as if to give grace a voice. That he often does it through the figurative, makes it all the more compelling. In "The World as Sound," he writes, "I didn't speak until I was five / Because everything was sound / My mother's high heel was a slide / Her foot sand into. The rectangle / Of the coffee table was a clinking / Glass and a book that played/ The violin."

The metaphors accumulate into synesthesia, giving entry into the speaker's autism rendered as a "scream turned / Inside out." That it ends with music

is unsurprising, as the poems build into the lyrical as much as the narrative, such as “The first time I heard a tango / I knew it was a purple rising / Through the folds of want.”

This collection might be the best reply to RFK Jr.’s notion that those on the spectrum could “never write a poem.”

Simms embraces the familial here as tricky, but honest, ground to tread. In “Forgetting,” the speaker refers to a mother’s dementia as becoming “Untethered from the familiar / like a kite with a broken string.”

The second stanza pivots to a hard-edged father who “indulged her/ tender to the very end” before shifting the focus to their relationship by sharing “he never touched me except / With his fists so the last time / I saw him I took him in my arms / Gently like a bundle of twigs / I could easily break but didn’t.”

It’s a powerful reversal of roles that shows the capacity for both change and forgiveness, reminiscent of Tony Hoagland’s equally potent poem, “Lucky.”

In “My Brother’s Hand,” a speaker seeks both understanding and closure for a brother, “both of us / On the spectrum / ...the cruelties / We practiced on each other / were multiplied by loneliness.”

The poem moves from one memory to another until landing “in that cheap motel / In Llano Texas eight years ago / The silence between us a lonely road / I’m tired of driving.” The poem ends with water acting as a symbol of cleansing, a purity coming from the “the deep lifting us toward shore / Our mother’s voice calling us home.”

The five sections of “Jubal’s Rising” move well together, and the themes range from the personal to the political to the pastoral, with none of the subjects feeling bogged in sameness.

Eponymous Jubal, a Biblical descendent of Cain and father of musicians, lingers as a persona too often encountered in the local news, their demise premature. In the title poem, he feels drawn, evoking Langston Hughes’ famous line, “What happens to a dream deferred?” The answer seems to be violence at the hands of loved ones and the allure of a street life colliding “with the law of fast returns/ Karma ketchup he calls it because / Every action boomerangs back atcha.”

Maybe the message of Simms’ latest is to ask what lies beyond ledes and headlines, compelling readers to stop and consider, for instance, “Dandelion,” where “out of beautiful neglect / wilding occurs, so/ on thin white wings // the seed settles / unnoticed, / bringing life to ruined places.”

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