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BOOK REVIEW

Trying to Expose the Heart

Gardening in the Dark
By Laura Kasischke
Ausable Press, 2004, 93 pp., $14, paper

Any Holy City
By Mark Conway
Silverfish Review Press, 2005, 76 pp., $14.95 paper

Walking Toward the Sun
By Edward Weismiller
Yale University Press, 2002, 64 pp., $24 cloth

Look in your heart and write, Sir Phillip Sidney prescribed long ago. *Heart.* One syllable carrying so much freight, out-of-date, like a worn valentine – outmoded, like so many popular songs. Considered for millennia the seat of being, center of truth, now reduced to a cliché, no longer even adequate to define the shifting line between life and death. With its connotations of shabby verse and country music, it is, perhaps, the word most capable of disrupting "serious" discourse about poetry today. Yet its rhythm beats still the primitive iambic on which poetry, arguably, is founded. Am I the only reader who, in the midst of a new poem, sometimes feels the urge to throw up both arms and shout, "I see how clever you are, how much you know. But what do you care about? What do you really *feel?*"

The long, post-confessional aftershock still threatens to obliterate this once important terrain. As late as 1965, Robert Creeley cited favorably Pound's dicta, "Only emotion endures" and "Nothing counts save the quality of the emotion;" in 1973, Donald Hall stated as a basic premise that "A poem is human inside talking to human inside;"

while in 2001 Robert Pinsky argued that poetry possesses a "double nature, simultaneously internal and social, discourse and mimesis . . . related to its place in the culture of a democracy." Compared to the *Defence of Poesie*, that's quite an order. Faced with the intimidating demands of our age, poets must contrive new ways to speak their hearts.

Laura Kasischke's *Gardening in the Dark*, her sixth collection (she's also published three novels), is a case study of distraction as a way of paying attention. It's also an index to the contemporary distrust of what we used to call the heart as a source of meaning. Kasischke's work has won her fans, accolades, honors, and (in the case of her novels) movies. In many ways this success is emblematic, even inevitable, for her polished voice is the essence of perky ambivalence, as if to defy the notion that there is anything for a poet to do other than to record the waywardness of the inner life.

For some decades in the latter part of the last century, the endlessly-dissolving modern Self was accorded, at least, the role of "performer" by various literary critics, sociologists, and anthropologists. From our perspective, even that much stability can seem as nostalgic as Sidney. As its title indicates, in *Gardening in the Dark* the private seems scarcely to connect to the public. Kasischke's self is a searcher in constant motion, but with no goal and no sense of direction. If it "performs" anything, it is its own alienation.

In a blurb, Dean Young praises the book's "arias of dislocations, dis-belongings, literal and figurative mis-fittings, conveying a cheerful richness even as their focus is on dread and decay, on isolation and grief." Whatever that means, it sounds right, and just

what the poet would like us to think. It's the sort of spotlight she'd like cast on herself, even while her poem's first gesture often is to declare that it's not worthy of much attention, including her own: "I found myself in a story / without suspense" is a typical opening ("Hardware Store in a Town without Men."). Kasischke invites us to share a predicament rather than a story. Even her losses tease us with their insignificance, as if nothing that matters will or could be revealed: "So where did they go, those / children we never had?" ("First Husband"). The very possibility of making sense exasperates her: "Love, love, what / the hell do you want from me?" ("Mrs. Oliver or, On a Wedding Anniversary"); "Did I plant these things in the garden? / What in God's name are they?"("Summer, Here"). There's a dark humor here, surely, but what to do with such vague, personable uncertainty?

One answer is that Kasischke's initial negative is often quickened by unasked-for feelings, including a guilty self-knowledge that is, at times, nearly Kafkaesque:

> The officer asks if I know
> why it is I've been pulled over. Oh,
> no, I say, not
>
> that armed robbery back in '88. It is a joke
> only a woman with two children in the car, a woman
> of a certain age could make.
> ("Speeding Ticket")

This could be a scene in a contemporary film with any number of familiar actresses in the lead role: Harried-Sassy-Mother-With-More-Inside-Than-You-Know (Joan Allen? Laura Linney?). Yet, more seriously, the joke acknowledges a female identity cut off from itself: trapped in social categories, burdened by the past, freighted with responsibilities, possessing neither essence nor goal.

Kasischke's game is a cunning one. She's already starring in the movie of herself as a twenty-first century female Crusoe, survivor of her own singular shipwrecks, awash in the detritus of her culture's shifting currents. She has made it as far as land, where she wanders the backstreets of the heart, letting us in, poem by poem, on its secrets. For all the verve and snappiness of her despair, Kasischke's poems are made of more than attitude. The urge to confess, *to tell someone* where she's been, to attempt to describe where she is and what she feels now, accrues a curious density, as if fragments lacking substance must be added and made to count. (Of what else do most of our private lives consist?) Here, for instance, is the reverie of a woman drying a plate, idly looking out the window into a dark yard:

> Somewhere tonight there must be a man
> who vaguely remembers me.
>
> A blind owl blinks in a tree.
> I'm glad. I am glad. May he remember me.
> The plate is already dry, but I
> make small circles at the center of it with a cloth.
> ("My Face Out There on a Cloud")

We get the fashionable (or tired?) idea that there is no "center" to the self. But it's the inner voice of unquiet desperation, tinged with *noir*-ish fatalism, that gives the moment urgency. A reader enticed by Kasischke's distracted dreamer will follow the poem into still more eccentric deviations:

> Out there, it's so dark
> for a while I forget who I am.
> I'm driving again
> into the desert at night
> as if it's a big black box.
> The dashboard is an altar
>
> strewn with maps and dust.
> I see a woman at the side of the road, walking

into the middle of nothing. Oh
my God, I know
something suddenly.

In spite of culminating almost in litany *("I have eaten the fruit of knowledge / . . . I have sipped from the cup of the unconscious"*), the poem willingy dissipates its spurt of heightened perception. It ends where it started, with a repetition of the title. Kasischke won't allow herself (or us) the drama of despair, let alone the catharsis of drama. The outcry of strong emotion ("Oh my God") finally points nowhere the reader can see, asks nothing of us.

The iconic female figure, trapped in her freedom but with nowhere to escape to, carries the book's possible insight as well as its self-absorbed sensibility. She reappears in identical terms ("making dreamy circles / at the center of a dish with a cloth") in another poem, which juxtaposes a mundane title ("Macaroni and Cheese") against an opening charged with "big" questions whose significance diminishes line by line:

One day you may be asked, "how
was it that God brought forth
being

out of nothing?"

Here the poet goes the long way home quickly: from God to a dishcloth in thirteen lines, ending in a kitchen in which a woman (presumably a mother) is not dreaming, but cooking, accompanied by (or imagining the presence of) a child. The effect is to balance the transcendent against the immediate, abstraction against actual human needs ("Love. Hunger. Other alchemies" she almost brusquely parses them). The unanswerable is answered by the real. At the end, the tense shifts from future-possible to Kasischke's familiar present:

Now
you can see that bird in the street
is wrestling something bloody

out of a carcass, trying
to expose its heart. You

put the dish down beside the cloth, and say,
"Darling, I don't know."

Kasischke's forty-something speaker is at her most convincing at such moments. You could say her work offers something like a postmodern take on the late Philip Larkin's more elegant but even less consoling interrogation of love and its promise of emotional coherence; for example, in these lines from his "Love Songs in Age":

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,
Broke out, to show
Its bright incipience sailing above,
Still promising to solve, and satisfy,
And set unchangeably in order . . . .

For Larkin, who can seem heart-*less*, form is the final consolation, or at least, the last one possible. For Kasischke, loss, the double of love, is still an angel to be wrestled with, even if there can be no winner. In "Gingerbread," she leavens the impenetrability of fate with self-satirizing wit: "Dear God, the things I've been," the eponymous storybook speaker recalls, lamenting:

Though I lived for a while in a fancy house
made out of nothing but me, what
was I but

the compulsion of another? A wish
unhinged? A simple reaction
to a simple stimulus?
neither sweet, nor bitter, nor voluntary.

In the end, the genderless storybook persona lets itself off the hook, at least partially: "I ran // but I was chased."

Kasischke is a virtuoso of tone. Her off-hand gestures can seem as reductive as a sitcom joke or stand-up monologue:

> My ex-husband in the bulk food aisle
> with an empty plastic bag, an infant
> daughter, a blond son.
> Wow. His. We hug. Plenty. Really. More than enough.
> ("Fog")

But there's more going on than the surface reveals. By the end, the poem has shifted its pronouns to direct address; its tone has also shifted remarkably:

> you could be walking straight through me without a shiver
> and I could be strolling across your grave without a smile.

It's as if she understands that the way to make her feelings matter is to pretend to discount them. In poem after poem, this trick works. The poems get and hold our attention by self-deprecating wit and images that strike cool fire: "driving fast past/the sloppy needlepoint / of lilacs in the breeze" ("Younger Woman Shopping for a Blouse"). Alive to nature, though disinterested in reading it for signs, Kasischke still has reckonings to make with her memories, longings she can't shake free of (even for God), a pervasive sense of emptiness: "The rain in the gutter sings the kind of song / women sing when they're falling out of love" ("Eighteen Days of Rain"). The seemingly trivial becomes the gritty, the real: "All morning I try to kill a fly in the kitchen, / but it isn't ready die. Who / is?" ("Quiet").

In *Gardening in the Dark* the individual poems function chiefly as symptoms of a condition, one guaranteed to play to that portion of today's audience fascinated by its own inability to assume the responsibilities of creating identity, making meaning. (Call it Existentialism Lite.) Kasischke is capable of rising beyond energetic nihilism to speak as

a poet who takes full account of time and destiny. The beginning of "Black Dress," one of the best examples of this, reads like an apology for her other opening-line evasions:

> I could go no further than that first line:
> *Spring comes even to the closet.*
> The words like little iron blossoms on a vine.

Clothing and mirrors are this poet's touchstone ways of signifying the instability of identity, the price of roles played. This time, the playfulness is deepened by mythic resonance: "Even / in Spring the closet's a blind hive. A black dress/hangs at its center – like Persephone, it's / the closet's prisoner, / and its queen." Characteristically hesitant at the outset, the poem turns into a meditation that culminates in a focused, steady voice. It shows what the poet can do when she eschews mere cleverness and keeps her attention on what she knows:

> black dress hangs always and omniscient in its single
> thought, its
> accumulating mass – a darkness tucked into another darkness:
> where I wore it first,
> where I'll wear it last.

Persephone, or no one? If those are the choices, Kasischke embraces both. How death-haunted and how insouciant this poet is: "How awful / resurrection / for someone like me will be" ("Sacred Flower Watching Me"), she tells us, with more than a little echo of Plath and Dickinson and all the others whose lucid hearts can absorb nothingness and make it pulse with life.

Mark Conway's first book, *Any Holy City*, winner of the 2003 Gerald Cable Book Award (but published this year), fairly shimmers with intense feeling, but feeling disciplined, as if unwilling to give itself over to the spontaneity of personality that fuels

Kasischke's work. Both collections worry about temporality, how to live in time; both are unable to shake the burden of self awareness. Where *Gardening in the Dark* frames itself in the present-tense of improvisation, haunted but unilluminated by the past, and (as the title suggests) uncertain of the future, *Any Holy City* offers a series of glosses on a past that seems, simultaneously, to be personal and cultural, historical and mythic. These, after all, are the multiple perspectives by which the idea of a "holy city" takes shape: myth serving cultural need, creating (often-violent) history.

In Conway's work, the personal is figured in the mythic and vice-versa. He is both lyricist of the belated and dramatist of the unseen. The book's first poem, "Addiction," packs a fractured story into small chunks of narrative cloaked in vivid natural imagery, fragments of myth, echoes of historical decline:

> From the middle
> of the prairie, it's half
> a day to the Forbidden City.
> The other half
> is dust.

At the center is an encounter rendered in the form of what could be a novelist's notes:

> And your people, what
> did they know? They were closing in,
> dying for a glimpse, the tell-tale
> crack.
> They gather round, whispering
> and wonder what it's like,
> the burning.

It's easy to read this as a portrayal of drug addiction, but the metaphor-shaded language, even at its most specific, doesn't authorize only one reading. We'll never know what reporters used to call the "true" story, never have a complete grasp of character and motivation, let alone plot. What we do know is how intensely the speaker carries the

burden of what *he* knows (or remembers), how the "burning" is carried in his being, and the muted helplessness he feels: "if you could speak / it would be for everything / to be as it was."

Everything in *Any Holy City*, including the title, begs to be read multiply; even the most immediate moments are tinged with belatedness, a sense of duplicity:

> Now we slip
> toward vespers, singed
> by a slight twist
> of vodka, humming
> in the clear velocity
> that shoots us past
> the nights when I was plausible,
> and yours. Here we sit with snapshots,
> nodding, pretending
> to remember our regret.
> ("Marginalia on Our Bodies")

"The eye's amused by lying," we're told ("Notorious"), and these poems convey a pervasive sense of the deceptiveness of experience. Simple desires pose complex questions: "I'm itching to take off your skin // and touch you to see which I want more, / to be burned or to be the burning" ("Before I Begin").

Such poems establish a strangely distorted rapport between human beings, one founded on silence and emotional distance as much as on recognition and physical proximity. "A Souk of Any City," the poem from which the book takes its title, illustrates this: "What will I call you, brother, before / I send you off forever? I call you / mine but not yet me." This amply demonstrates the difficulties and rewards of Conway's rhetoric, which has a hermeneutics of its own. While the title refers to the Middle Eastern bazaar, so that we might feel confident at least of setting, even that is thrown into doubt by the nonrestrictive modifier ("any") repeated in the last stanza:

No wonder you're
distant – my clinging is so crude. No wonder
you're dead. I'll ride with you through

the market of Tyre, oh, any holy city just
until I press my face against the children's
sticky shoulders. Until I know you won't
lift me. Until what you lack is all I need.

"Holy" and "city" are more easily yoked than "holy" and "market," or the two figures in the poem. One may be a persistent beggar, the other a transient, possibly a tourist. But which is which?

Such ambiguities can make a poem seem precious. But Conway's art is not one that attempts to "play" with meaning or to cancel its very foundations in some theoretical way. Rather, it burns (a favorite recurring word) with desire for the very transcendence it denies. Conway does not delight in paradox; it's the only way he knows to gauge reality. He does so with a verbal dexterity and richness of intellect that surely deserve the title "metaphysical," and which are reminiscent of Donne, or of Hopkins' self-anguish (as in these lines from one of his early, untitled poems):

Myself unholy, from myself unholy
To the sweet living of my friends I look
. . .
No better serves me now, save best: no their
Save Christ: to Christ I look, on Christ I call.

Conway does not, or cannot, call on any god, despite the god-haunted nature of his work.

To weigh immortal longings against an imperfect reality might be a high-toned way to characterize the philosophical threads that hold this three-part collection together. But that would be to ignore the way the poems are studded with the momentary, the personal, the intimate. The autobiographical hints never reach full disclosure. Clues lead to more clues. The personal is at best a partial source of meaning, but also the site of an

incompletion nothing can satisfy. The result is more than the relentless monotone of despair. One of the most accessible poems cheerfully accepts the absence of connection to the monumentally spiritual, as the speaker contemplates "the junk the neighbors / dropped in our yard":

> . . . they wave and I wave
> and they wave. I smile as I say
> to the back of their car, "Father,
> put out their eyes," and they wave
> and I wave, nothing's happened.
> There's no recall to Rome.
> cardinals kneading their hands,
> there are no sirens, no schisms,
> no coups. Stick it up your ass, I sing,
>
> and kick around my yard. Everything's
> fine and I'm getting by, no more
> divine than that bird over there,
> whatever it is, and no less.
> ("I'm Not Vishnu")

Earthy and disarming, this is in the spirit of Stevens's "The Man on the Dump," who celebrates the bare absolute of reality, "The the."

Conway does not view the lack of miracles so genially elsewhere, when the desire for some sort of restoration or wholeness is at stake. That desire is both transparently expressed and defiantly denied in "The Way Back" (quoted in full):

> I'd be more guarded if I knew you were
> watching, leering, nearly naked,
> stylishly at rest.
>
> You're wrong if you think I want to be known
> utterly, you in your angelic homburg,
> fogged in reticence.
>
> I talk to myself in our olden tongue.
> You hear I know by the quality
> of your indifference.

I rave about the others, halted on the road,
insist we've not conspired –
You ride alone.

I know what you like by the way that you
leave me. We're never going
back, are we? Speak to me
one more time about home.

Here is the book's more dominant mode, as much a puzzle as a poem steeped in paradox and incompletion. Though the language is clear, the voice perfectly cadenced, the absent other so specifically addressed seems to exist only as the function of the speaker's internal monologue. The promise packed in the title is negated by the poem itself; its final lines are resonant with desolate longing, like the perfectly uttered prayer of a lapsed believer.

Odd how the central issue of prayer ("is anybody listening?") still has relevance for poetry. Ancient Greek lyricists might distinguish songs addressed to gods from songs addressed to men, and even had a category for poems addressed to both. For the predominantly secular poets of today, the audience may be the only god that matters. Are poems really written only to *communicate*? Or is it possible that at the heart of some, a secret fire burns; call it a remnant of the blaze that was Romanticism, exhausted by Symbolism and the Moderns. Call it a desire for language to matter as much as desire itself.

Such speculation is invited by the middle section of *Any Holy City*, entitled, "The Book of Isaac, Burning." Here, Conway borrows a story and turns it on his own lathe so that, in its new shape, we can still see what it's made of. The Old Testament tale of Abraham and Isaac provides something between a meta-narrative and an "objective correlative" for many of the poet's chief obsessions. The method is archetypal in the way

Stanley Plumly defines it in *Argument & Song* (2003): "the archetype is original and familiar, ancient and present, eternal and mortal; . . . its ghost cannot be summoned except in a living, particular moment."

This audacious central sequence reinvents Genesis 22 to give voice to what is lost by reading that famous text only as a meaning-shaping myth. The result is not a reinterpretation of the "big" issues offered by thinkers like Kierkegaard, but the inscription of many "small" perspectives that give voice to what is *not* in the original. Instead of portraying a hierarchy of masculine power, Conway's defamiliarized and fractured narrative deals with the personal, the internal, the particular. Some of these sections obviously derive from the inherited story; others expand or break its parameters. Together, they invent for it an expanded range of meanings based on psychology, emotion, and family drama, including a sister's concern ("I called in my mind, / run, brother, run Isaac"), Isaac's rationalization of his father's love, and Abraham's insight (or lack of same) into his experience. These poems provide moments that humanize old and new characters alike. Several poems belong to an unidentified anachronistic speaker who comments and analyzes:

> There may be justice in retribution,
> but it isn't
>
> human–it seeks a mouth
> to give it lips, then laughter,
>
> the full sorrow of a mortal
> face. In this short life, the wound
>
> is verified by the knife. And so
> a father will pull his son
>
> behind him like a plow, and how
> a son will lodge against a rock

to break his father down . . . .
(“After a Father”)

Conway’s version alludes to the death of Isaac, as if there had been no author-God to set the story right, to spare everyone the horrible moment of obedience. His Abraham suffers a kind of remorse and pays a cosmic penance. Father betrays son, who in turn betrays his son; Abraham’s God the Father is last seen leaving. The final lines seem to belong to the sister, witness to the ultimate in paternal abandonment: “my father sat in the dirt, / chanting His name.” I say “seem” because these lyrics don’t attempt to explain themselves. Indeed, some passages have the evocative clarity of an ancient myth only partially understood (“Strangers came across the plains / as gods // to barter. Strangers or gods, // They were soiled, mindless / as children.”) Exactly how they function is only as obvious as a change of tonality in music.

For all its obscurities, “The Book of Isaac, Burning” is a *tour-de-force* – imaginative, moving, and with an ambitious reach (its title, for example, may also look back to the destruction of the Library at Alexandria, referred to more than once in the collection). Voice and form modulate together; each poem challenges assumptions in a way that goes beyond casting new light on familiar themes. Of course, Fathers and Sons is itself a “big” theme that haunts Western psyche and culture. Conway’s surprising treatment gathers an intensity that seems at once personal and paradigmatic. If what’s at stake in the whole remains unresolved by the sum of the individual pieces, there’s no missing the uncommon intensity and skill with which it’s been realized. And there’s no missing, either, the wrenching liturgical power of certain sections:

As white shutters and as white
As tourniquet,

As black
As creeks,
As numerous
As glass, the window shattered,
        kindly, to save the fist
As groan, as famine feeds thin dogs, the father falls
. . .
After the son dies, fathers.
After the son dies. –
                (“White: Echo)

Any Holy City ends with a short series of taut, almost ascetic poems that are, at bottom, meditations on death. Every memory and perception, however casual, is imbued with it:

        I swam
back to the raft
my hand red with coral
to amaze you

and surfaced seeing
you and our son

alone while I
floated toward you
remembering what it was like
not to be there.
                (“Ulterior Summer”)

Some of these poems, like earlier ones, refer to relationships so private, a reader may feel the frustration of secrets never revealed. By this point, we’re accustomed to Conway’s aesthetic of opaque intimacy. As a coda, the last section strikes a balance between private loss and common destiny, a sense that, caught between past and future, we must learn to take solace in what Stevens called “the nothing that is”:

        Winter
was hard, the cold broke
weak and strong, together. Stay
        and watch the robins scream
over scattered barley.

This is how we came to
love this life –
by wanting
the next.
("First Body")

Conway's work risks obscurity for the promise of discovery. He seems motivated by a confidence that lyric poetry can move beyond the familiar without dissipating credibility and passion. That it can take us into the interior and out again without making us feel lost.

One of my favorite haiku by Basho (as translated by Lucien Stryk) goes like this:

Come, see real
flowers
of this painful world.
(*On Love and Barley* #128)

These lines suggest something of the spirit of Edward Weissmiller's *Walking Toward the Sun.* Weismiller holds the distinction of being at once the youngest and the oldest living recipient of the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, which he won in 1936 at the age of twenty-one for a volume entitled, *The Deer Come Down.* Since that time, he has published two other collections, one in 1946 and one in 1980 when he was rediscovered by Word Works Press. In between, he published a successful (subsequently reprinted) espionage novel based on his own experiences in World War II. Weismiller may be that rarity, a poet who publishes only when he feels the need, or simply one who has not had enough opportunity or inclination. Whatever the case, his reappearance at an advanced age is a welcome one.

In a Foreword, W.S. Merwin recalls first meeting the eighty-two year old Weismiller, and says of subsequently reading his new manuscript, “It was not like any other, just as a mature face is distinct from any other.” The poems reveal the face of one who walks with open eyes toward the end of his life. The eyes are dimmed by neither memory nor tears. Weismiller’s is a sensibility that seems to speak to us from another age. I don’t mean simply the years when he was young, but that timeless zone inhabited by the classicist and the stoic, all those who view reality with humility and clear intelligence. Such poets are rare and valuable in any age. Still rarer is the depth of earned feeling under his poems’ chiseled surfaces.

Weismiller’s principal subjects are time, love, place, and nature. He is a master of understated but complex truth about all of these, sometimes in intricate combination. One poem tells what happened to the ribbons residents in a home for the elderly once tied to a small tree as a project to commemorate “children, who would not grow / old.” In March, the tree “was a fist of color,” but, when Spring came, “they could see the ribbons less and less,” the fate of young and old alike overwhelmed by the rebirth of the non-human world:

> They had longed for spring,
> they had not thought they cared what birds made nests of,
> but this was different. They had spent their lives
> thinking that only they could make signs,
> and that still seemed true, but
> now they felt cold, wondering
> what it would be like not to have to.
>
> (“The Tree in Front of the Old People’s Home”)

Not a purveyor of easy insights, Weismiller doesn’t need to exaggerate either his style or his content. His ability to fix words exactly to the subject often reveals the subject to us effortlessly, like a sudden perception:

It has become
speech, the sound a
quail's wings make when it
takes flight from the grass somewhere
near my feet. There is a
rising chuckle,
abrupt, mirthless, a dry
scolding of the air,
then silence, the
direction of which I
almost know.
("Quail")

Despite a career as a Miltonist (or maybe because of that), Weismiller 's work exemplifies the art of compression. In an era of narratives, not telling more than you know and not explaining what you tell sometimes seems like a lost way of writing. *Walking Toward the Sun* contains many instances of the spare eloquence of simple words deployed in perfect rhythm:

Back where the eyes are closed
I looked to find someone
I love.
I wondered, Is it dark?

Back where the head is turned
away, I found her.
She was walking downhill
and could not hear me.

Back where the seed is cold
I wait. Maybe for her.
Maybe for spring,
if this is winter.
("Song Under My Breath")

There's a primitive power in such minimalist workings, which break the world down to monosyllables before allowing it to expand again. This is what occurs, for example, in the ending of "Sunken Forest":

The odor is

of patience.

Of sleep. This is a map
of sleep. The spell
not cast. An old man, an old house filled with rooms,
most in darkness. Tomorrow the same.

Weismiller, who in 2001 received the Robert Fitzgerald Award for lifetime contribution to the study of metrics and versification, is a teacher who knows how to do superbly the thing he teaches. The very first lines of the book's opening poem school the ear to listen to what is not said through what is:

How much time has passed. The great root
has spilled the wall.
The children put on years and went to look for fruit.

There's more than a touch of the symbolist to this poet. Trees are his figures of permanence; rooms and houses signify the transience of the human: "I live where you do, in rooms / like packed boxes." They also stand for the persistence of memory:

And I will move, if only
to try to find out
what happened to me here,
what it meant, just being
in a place like this.
("Moving")

They stand, most of all, for the inner life of a man, part mystery, part memory:

What I do not know is
what I would shelter or do shelter, what houses I am,
strange to my understanding, that will fall.
("Houses")

"What shall I do with this absurdity – / O heart, O troubled heart" Yeats laments in "The Tower," one of the greatest of poems about old age. Less tormented, but no less clear about intimations of mortality, Weismiller renders the finality of time with a simple change of tense in the last line of the exquisite "Bay Island," quoted below in its entirety:

Some night you will go to your door, and there
you will smell an unknown fragrance sweeter than jasmine,
frail as the scent of a thousand single flowers,
but there will be no flowers, and it may be winter;
a stubbed-down searchlight will play across the clouds,
a salt mast creak, gulls follow,
the dark water brings home distance.

It is the night. It was always the night.

The book's middle section deals with personal losses and transformation. Two of the strongest poems concern heart transplants; metaphorical or actual, they are tough statements of survival. The language of one is blunt, eloquently shocking:

I'll take any heart they give me, though,
that some mother is through using.
Will they make any shit
I cannot eat? I doubt it.
Anything that can be refrigerated, I'm for.
Later.
I expect to be here a long time.
("The Metamorphoses")

The other is a lyric with a telling, italicized refrain: "Where can I dance? / *said the live heart in the dead body*" ("A Beached Whale").

Memory inevitably becomes the final place where one dances with the unresolved and unforgotten:

How should I think long
upon the white of that skin?
She goes, and it becomes
flower petal,
ivory,
the moon, chalked with night.

And that is a different journey
from the intent room
where her love
rivered with blue
that white skin, that white skin.

The boldface that marks the first line above as the title indicates the playful spirit that is one of the hallmarks of this unexpected collection. Several poems experiment with textual arrangement on the page: "Dialogue of the Dead" takes the form of two, adjoining, asymmetric columns, and there's both a "One-Sided Conversation #_____" and a "One-Sided Conversation with Henry" (subtitled, "*re the poetry circuit*"), which pays homage to Berryman while satirizing the erotic underside of "po' biz": "One thing they do, they pour their emptiness / into bed with you."

Weismiller retains his earthiness along with his wisdom; as for the latter, he claims none. Filled with deep appreciation of ordinary life, this accomplished poet has no urgent pleas, morals, or messages to impart, other than that he's been fortunate to see and feel so much:

> Neon lights the west.
> Neon lights the east.
> The dark has run down.
> I can come to no conclusion.
> ("Roulette")

The final lines of the last poem (which is the title poem) remind us that in the private life is to be found our common humanity:

> We are all
> walking toward the sun. Like everyone else,
> I must go into the shadows
> to see.
> ("Walking Toward the Sun")

A master of syllabics and form, this underappreciated poet is also an explicator of the human heart. We should listen closely.