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MARNIE POMEROY, BLUE MOON, Greenwich Exchange, London, 2015 67pp. £9.99



Marnie Pomeroy and I last met in 1998 in Montreal, at the wedding of our daughter, the writer and journalist Maeve Haldane. From 1966 to 1976 Marnie and I lived and worked together as poets, first for a year in Portugal, then in Québec where we founded the Ladysmith Press which published over twenty books, by ourselves and ten other poets, most of them young. The first volumes were typeset and printed by ourselves on a platen press. During our years together we read most of each other's poems. Neither of us could predict their arrival, but once they were in existence we suggested revisions to each other. Our voices remained our own.

Three of Marnie's poems had appeared in *New World Writing*, 1958, selected by Robert Graves as guest editor. She was the youngest of seven poets Graves had chosen – among them, James Reeves, Martin Seymour-Smith, and Alastair Reid. In his introduction Graves wrote: 'She worries at her poems like a dog at a bone, and though finding it hard to curb a naturally florid imagination, always persists until she has beaten her problem.'

One of the three poems is 'Snow Down South' which begins:

This transmutation which you sadly call
Temporary, shallow, merely local,
Comes upon the woodlands white and crystal
Overnight as wrought by sleet and snowfall.

Marnie grew up in New York state, and she writes often about snow. In *Blue Moon*, the first poem of 'Spring Sequence' is:

Melting off, snow rose in mists that hovered
over last year's lopped and angled stalks –
cripples on winter's killing field uncovered.

And the second poem ends:

The shelf of snow wastes,
hour by hour,
its dirty diamonds trickling
down to a few ice-crusts.

Now blue stars in the grass
come twinkling out,
and one by one,
each jonquil's frilled horn
toots forth its yellow

under the daffodil sun.

There are other snow poems in the new collection. The description is always precise. But the 'florid imagination' which Graves noted in 1958 is literally present in the jonquil that 'toots forth its yellow / under the daffodil sun.'

Marnie's first book of poetry, in 1966, was *A Calendar for Dinah* – a long poem with a section for each month of the year, telling the story from *Genesis* chapter 34 of how Dinah's lover who has made her pregnant is murdered by her brothers. In the poem the story is set in New England, and it begins and ends with snow. I have always found the last lines wonderful:

Everyone hushes. Earth spins to its deepest darkness
With a dead moon, and seems to pause there, frozen.
Stars fly further apart through endless night.

Dinah was followed by three collections published at Ladysmith, 1968 to 1972: *Soft Jobs and Miracles*, *For Us Living*, and *The Speck*. Then there was a long gap of 38 years until *The Flaming* in 2010, and now *Blue Moon* in 2015. When we talked at our daughter's wedding in 1998 I asked if she still wrote poems. 'When they hit me', she replied. One thing we have in common is that whether or not we are writing poems, we do not seem desperate to publish them. After 1972 I also had a gap in publishing until 1992. Perhaps as the Ladysmith years ended we had lost faith in publishing, or even, temporarily in the poetry which had originally brought us together. For a while I turned to psychology. She turned to painting and to playing the violin.

The Flaming (2010) and *Blue Moon* are both published by Greenwich Exchange – which has also published my *Collected Poems 1966-2009*, and two other volumes. The connection is that in 2000 or so I suggested to Greenwich Exchange's owner and editor James Hodgson that Marnie would be a good person to write a 'Student Guide' to Emily Dickinson. Later she wrote a Guide to Sylvia Plath. The Greenwich Exchange 'model' for publishing poets is that they also write Student Guides. I wrote Guides on Donne and Hardy. Since the Guides make at least some money while slim volumes of poems make even less, this very practical model enables Greenwich Exchange to keep publishing independently-minded poets who are also committed to what they consider is good poetry by others.

In the ten years we spent together I doubt if either of us changed very much the way the other's poems turned out. We even had different habits in revising poems. She did indeed 'worry at her poems like a dog at a bone', and in her case this often led to her expanding thoughts when re-wording them. I used to tease her that she revised her poems into new ones. I tended to follow the old adage 'When in doubt, cut it out', and she teased me about butchering my poems. In revision her poems often grew larger and mine smaller.

But we did support each other in the position that poetry was for poetry, and for other poets, and for its dedicated readers – but never for what our friend Robert Graves called 'the old clothes men of literature', the parasites on poetry, the critics and academics who have taken it on themselves to interpret poetry for university students and to expand public awareness of it – in effect to sell it with a moral commission. We knew even when together that we were each on our own in our responsibilities to poetry. We reinforced each other's dedication to it. *Blue Moon* shows that Marnie's dedication has not flagged.

Blue Moon implies 'once in a blue moon' in that poems emerge when they want to. As Robert Frost said, 'poems come into being but they cannot be worked into being.' Genuine poems are rare. They are also 'necessary' (Graves), or 'impelled' (Hardy). I can see no poems among these 45 (under 31 titles) which do not justify their own existence in the reading. At worst they can be static descriptions where nothing happens, as in 'Tree Characters', one of which, 'The Dying Tree' is:

The tree we love for merely being there
is scorched by drought and making us aware:
Dry and narrowed, each leaf has the look
of a dead raincoat hanging on its hook.

Well, all raincoats are dead in the sense of not being alive, but I suppose in this case the raincoat is a dead leaf. I find this poem quite slack, but all the same, the image of the leaf as a raincoat will stick.

The same kind of slackness occurs in another poem where 'Fences' iron spikes grin endlessly'. I cannot *see* this grin. Marnie's imagery is often, as here, expressionistic. She happens to be short sighted, and I wonder if sometimes not seeing clearly allows her (florid) imagination to fill in the gaps – sometimes excitingly, sometimes not. Here is an example of when it's exciting, the beginning of the title poem, 'Blue Moon':

On the prowl for love like any woman,
with silver greasepaint covering up her pockmarks,
the glamorous blue moon, who's made an entrance,
sashays above our fields and trees and porches.
She's swathed in silks of the night sky, each layer
darker – twilight deepening to midnight,
Multi-armed, she's like an Asian goddess,
reaching down to us with long, white moon-rays

through the night and in through the world's windows
to drop her billets-doux on floors and carpets....

This poem is followed by 'Wind Concerto' which also offers a personification which although it may seem grotesque, works in a tour de force:

Night, in his wide black cape, sweeps onto the stage
to perform his Wind Concerto upon tall forests.

Commanding miles of keyboards, pedalled branches,
and numberless stops in air for inner voices,
Night, berserk with passion, plays them all.

His audience long gone, the waning moon –
her face deranged, lopsided, white – still listens,
up in the star-littered gallery of Sky Hall.

At a technical level, Marnie makes few mistakes. Vowels and consonants are varied, with no distracting assonances or alliterations, and no s's eliding with other s's. And as usual in her work, when rhymes occur it is not too often for what she is saying.

Both the above poems are in the traditional English five stress line, which as I have pointed out in an article for *The Reader* on 'Pulsation and Poetry' (see ESSAYS on this website) expresses the human heartbeat. In five stress lines, most of the strong stresses are *preceded* by a weak stress. E.g. 'belong', 'a fall', 'disturb', 'my love'. This reflects the sound of a heart if you put your ear or a stethoscope to a person's chest: a double thump in which the second thump is louder. Marnie, I think more frequently than other poets, often ends a five stress line with a stress *followed* by a weak syllable – e.g. 'voices', 'branches', 'listens', 'lovelorn'. The effect is a 'dying fall'. I suspect she is conscious of this. Section III of *Blue Moon* consists, after a brief prose introduction, of ten poems about the Wassaic Valley in New York, where she grew up – 'when we were saucer-eyed and small', as she put it in an early poem about herself and her brother. The ten poems consist of 145 unrhymed lines almost all of which end with a stress then a weak syllable. This may not have been planned but is intrinsic to the rhythms and cadences of the entire set of poems. Almost every line ends with a dying fall. And this fits the mood of the entire sequence, which is elegiac. For example:

There on top of the world where far blue mountains
floated, half mirage on the horizon;
up there, where we were partly sky and walked in
clouds and spoke with wind, we were possessed by
a presence greater than our huge aloneness.

Marnie's poems are not overtly musical, but they show a subtlety in rhythm. She has played the violin in an orchestra, as well having painted pictures.

Many so-called poems offer ‘word pictures’: descriptions without rhythm or intensity of emotion. Marnie and I both liked the American poet Trumbull Stickney’s definition of poetry as ‘musical thought.’ The few poems in *Blue Moon* that fall slightly flat, to me consist of word pictures without emotional intensity or musical thought:

The fall trees shimmer – bronze, red, mauve, pink, orange,
and extreme yellow on the royal-blue air,
till leaves that somersault and cartwheel down
in rustling currents end packed flat and brown...

The description of the cartwheeling leaves becoming ‘packed’ is striking, and to my mind the word-picture is touched by a hint of emotion: regret? More often, even if descriptive, the poems have pizzaz: the moon sashaying across the sky, the jonquil that toots forth its yellow. This introverted and at times reclusive poet has often taken risks. I remember being horrified by one of her early poems, about the American murderer Edward Gein who killed women, then skinned them and danced with their bodies (all described in the poem). The last line is ‘Hell’s mansions let love in.’ ‘No! I protested. That was *not* love!’ I found the poem grotesque. That ‘florid imagination’ could go too far. On a lighter level I once wrote a teasing parody of her style, of which I can recall only the last two lines:

A chicken sandwich flying by
Makes this my grotesquerie.

She saw the joke, and thank goodness did not change her approach in poems.

Marnie has always written poems about death – as true poets so often do. (Pasternak advised poets to keep their mind on death). There are a few about death in *Blue Moon*, for example one called ‘Last Words’. But I am struck by how attached to life most of these poems are. Many of Marnie’s earlier poems were about the ups and downs of love. The poems in *Blue Moon* often reflect a solitariness that has always been part of her character – even when she is with other people. Many of her earlier poems were sad to the point of being depressive. But I am astonished how she now, in her eighties, writes with such a lively engagement with the natural world around her. Not so much with other people. But there is one extraordinary poem which I hope she won’t mind my quoting entirely:

WHAT TO MAKE OF IT?

She, down South retreats to her warm chamber,
weakening in the springtime’s cold,
the fire-eater grown old;

he, up North, the dreamer,
too passive for anger,
shrinks, though young, from one short, rainy winter...

she, with her love / hate for him;

he, sad and puzzled, with a hunger
where love had failed them at the centre...

she, skeletal in her dying, the illness named;
he, pink in his prime, his death cocooned for longer...

she, her ferocity backed up, eating her inside-out;
he, only irked by irritability...

she, still the stronger.

All I can say about this poem is 'Hats off!' How often do you come across a poem as mercilessly precise as this? Marnie Pomeroy has never been part of the mainstream of the poetry industry – now a torrent of personality, politics, award-giving, festivals, readings, and parasitic commentary. She is a private poet who only emerges in public with the occasional publication, but she is one of the outstanding poets in English of our time.