POEMS THAT STAND BY THEMSELVES

Review of Marilyn L. Taylor's *Subject to Change*. David Robert Books. 2004. 74 pps.

by Dick Allen

There are so many contemporary poets out there, how does a reader come to pay special attention to the work of one?

In my case, it was because my wife very much liked a sonnet she found on *Verse Daily,* then emailed to me.

The poem was Marilyn L. Taylor's "The Geniuses Among Us." Here's its octave:

They take us by surprise, these tall perennials
that jut like hollyhocks above the canopy
of all the rest of us—bright testimonials
to the scale of human possibility.
They come to bloom for every generation,
blazing with extraordinary notions

from the taproots of imagination—

dazzling us with incandescent visions.

I read the poem, was taken enough by it to print it out, reread it slowly, liked it even more, and finally wrote a note of admiration to its author—whom I've never met personally. I told her of my intent to buy the book from which the poem came, hoping to find other of her poems that would equally move me.

Too often when I do this, it turns out that the book of poems doesn't live up to the single poem that caught my attention. Or perhaps I've found three or four other poems by the poet on the Internet. In either case, when I read an entire book by their author, a preponderance of weaker or weak poems disappoints. Over the years, I've come to believe that many poets of our times have written one or two exceptional poems, but very few have created bodies of work which include a high number of other works nearly equal in quality.

Luckily, *Subject to Change* is filled with splendid poems. It contains, one after another, a surprise, a delight, a poem stabbing the heart or flirting with the mind. Rather than being a collection that depends on a totality of effect, the book is one of those increasingly rare collections where poems stand by themselves as individual poems.

I don't give this praise lightly. Such accomplishment is unusual, particularly in a poet who has not yet achieved major national acclaim.

Here's the sonnet's sestet:

And soon, the things we never thought would happen
start to happen: the solid fences
of reality begin to soften,
crumbling into fables and romances—
and we turn away from where we've been
to a new place, where light is pouring in.

What is first apparent about Taylor's poetry is the sheer wit and skill of it. She is an unabashed formalist, in love with rhyme and meter and form (although she also writes free verse), but her ear is so good, her use of enjambment so expert, her subject material so contemporary and often "fun" that she seems brand new.

In "The Geniuses Among Us" (which I should have spotted earlier when it first appeared in *Poetry*, but didn't—such is the advantage of the Internet in spotlighting poems), there's also the lushness or even deliciousness of words and sounds: "perennials," "hollyhocks," "taproots," "incandescent." There's an expert play of iambs and trochees, and that wonderful spondee ("new place") in the last line, before the comforting iambics of "where light is pouring in."

The sonnet is an example of the true "New Formalism" that's linked with Expansive Poetry, rather than the New Formalism which is mainly just old rhymed and metered lyric poetry with "New" tacked onto its description. It's an example of this true new genre because of its attention to non-Confessionalism subject and thematic material, its ease with natural speech patterns, and its confident use of "us" and "we."

Having lived through about fifty years of Confessional poetry, in which the poet usually felt only capable of expressing her or his personal subjective views (Did T.S. Eliot really start all that with "The Waste Land" allusion to F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*: "We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison"?) how good to hear again a poet confident she understands us, empathizes with us and is one of us enough to speak for us.

Further, "The Geniuses Among Us" demonstrates that other too rare quality that makes a short poem memorable: the almost effortless welding of a connection between the specific and the abstract, the known and unknown. That is, the geniuses are like startling flowers; reality is like a solid fence. Specific fences crumble into the abstracts of fables and romances.

Things here are "subject to change" and this quality pervades Taylor's book, its title indicating the mutabilities she explores. We are simultaneously subject to change and admonished to change and told there will be change. Or as she puts it in the book's title villanelle, talking of her young students:

. . . I have to tell myself it's wrong
to think of them as anything but fiction,
these creatures that I briefly move among—

Since she's obsessed with not only generations and ageing, but with how humans move, gracefully or not, towards Death, what we first take as many humorous poems almost always have an undercurrent of sorrow. The book's *tour de force* poem sequence,

"Outside the Frame: The Photographer's Last Letters to Her Son" is a brilliant set of poems on change, tracking a female photographer's descent into Alzheimer's. It begins with the photographer at 75 having a bit of realization ("guess I'm getting old / and strange"), then moves to a hospital, a convalescent home, a farm ("Obviously the FBI / has come to find hard / evidence of my / incompetence"), back to the convalescent home where there's a jigsaw puzzle with lost pieces (. . . "it's hard, because // many are lost") and finally back to the hospital and farm where the words on the page scatter to reproduce the scattering of the photographer's mind. At the end—and it's also the book's last poem—there's the photographer's marvelous survival as (note the use of asterisks) ***afterimage*** and ***gatherer of light***.

Such triumphs abound, for despite constant buried dread, there's a great deal of joy, of carpe diem, in Taylor. "Summer Sapphics," with which the volume begins, relates,

Maybe things are better than we imagine
if a rubber inner-tube still can send us
drifting down a sinuous, tree-draped river
like the Wisconsin—
.....
we are like invertebrate creatures, floating
on a cosmic droplet—a caravan of
giant-sized amoebas, without a clear-cut
sense of direction.

Other perspectives are present. In one poem Taylor's speaker imagines herself being viewed as a "native" in a picture of her taken by a Japanese tourist. During "In Another Thing I Ought to be Doing," the speaker addresses her breasts:

So now I should be taking special care
of them, is that it? Every month go pat
pat pat—when what they've done for me is flat
out bloody nothing? Case in point: where
were they when I was fourteen, fifteen,
and topographically a putting green?

She also, in "Inventing the Love Poets," engages in further humorous transformations:

Don't want to hear that he's an overweight
associate professor who takes bran
for breakfast—or that she's the ultimate
suburban mom, with dog and minivan—

Note that rhyme of "bran" and "minivan," by the way. New formalists have opened up whole new revised editions of rhyming dictionaries.

The sheer virtuosity of much of Taylor's rhyming and form and sound structures is a constant pleasure for the reader. She's very clever in setting up and taking down her

poems. And as we might expect, this inventiveness is also apparent in some of her treatments of people. For instance, there's a cleverly crafted crown of sonnets, called "Notes from the Good-Girl Chronicles, 1963" that's a mini-history evocation of the reasons why women's liberation was so absolutely necessary. It shows us the "Fly-girl" ("I was the concubine inside the head / of every traveling salesman on the plane"), the subservient wife, the beauty queen's mother, the sad sixteen-year-old girl who thinks her life is ruined because she's had sex, the woman bitterly living with aging parents, a block-watcher sneering at a neighbor woman who rightfully leaves her boorish husband (think of the woman in *The Hours*), concluding with the sad realization when "Mrs. McKinney Looks Back" and is "haunted by the thought / of what I might have been": "we nearly always played / our grand theatricals to empty houses."

The danger with cleverness and adroit satire is that it can very easily become snippy and speak in an overly scornful imperative voice. Taylor comes close to being this way, in such poems as "The Adulterer's Waltz." Almost always, however, she pulls back and a good time is had with such targets as "The Relatively Famous Poet's Mother." It begins:

She will be thick
of thigh and torso, noticeably dense
upstairs, and yet phenomenally quick
to view a certain person's eloquence
as lunatic.

Above all, it's the *combination* of technique and non-Confessional subject matter and theme I most admire in this poet's work. A case in point is "The Blue Water Buffalo." Set in the Mekong Delta, it's a small masterpiece of description and imagery. We see "On both sides of the screaming highway, the world / is made of emerald silk" In these "sumptuous bolts of it / . . . that shimmer and float,

. . . . plods the ancient buffalo—dark blue
in the steamy distance, and legless
where the surface of the ditch dissects
the body from its waterlogged supports below

or it might be a woman, up to her thighs
in the lukewarm ooze. . . .

The poem has as its epigraph *"One in 250 Cambodians, or 40,000 people have lost a limb to a land mine"* and we know what will happen to this woman although—and this is important—it doesn't happen in the poem itself. The poem is all foreboding.

Other poems feature objects or people seen from different angles, such as a Nissan Stanza station wagon, with its play on old poetic stanzas, and "The Aging Huntress." In this latter poem, the Huntress says,

Maybe I'll take you to town tonight,
tricked out in gilt and camouflage—
see how it goes with the men.

But not the young men. "It's their fathers, beery and balding—/ and the loners in their silver ponytails, / heartbreakingly wistful." No one has caught better the sadness of the aging hippie male.

Likewise, in the sonnet "Reading the Obituaries," Taylor records for the future the fading of women's names that once were in vogue and of a generation and "Now the Barbies have begun to die, / trailing their older sisters to the grave, / the Helens, Margies, Nans. . . . taking their leave / a step or two behind the hooded girls / who bloomed and withered with the century— / the Dorotheas, Eleanors and Pearls." And there's even more, but you have to buy the book.

It's impossible, by the way, to resist reading many of Taylor's poems aloud to whoever is nearby—for the sounds, the delight, the way their closures click the poems shut, the audacious concepts. We sympathize aloud with Taylor's seeming alter-ego, Aunt Eudora, in "Aunt Eudora's Harlequin Romance," when the aunt, reading the Romance, turns young: "Her frowzy hair / thickens and turns gold, her dim eyes clear" as "the steamy pages flutter by, unread, / as lover after lover finds her bed."

Always, there are recoveries and adjustments. With "Explication of a True Story" Taylor finds a distancing device to tell the almost unspeakable story of a father molesting the narrator's college roommate. "Surveying the Damage" is a moving understanding of possible recovery,

just as a storm-door, rattling its hinges
against the late debacle, opens wide

(stanza break)

onto a shoreline paved with residual snow,
gleaming like a coral reef.

If Marilyn L. Taylor were publishing in England, I'm sure she'd be as acclaimed as Stevie Smith and Wendy Cope. To my way of thinking, she's better. Proper recognition will probably take too many years. Yet as we use the Internet more and more to exchange single poems we like, that can stand by themselves—individual poems that are immediately relevant to our lives—I feel there's an excellent chance that much deserved acclaim will happen. Some of Taylor's poems will come to be key representations of both our turn-of-the-century time and the states of mind that flourished here, that caused both laughter and weeping.

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Dick Allen's sixth collection of poetry, *The Day Before: New Poems* (Sarabande Books, 2003) was a Finalist for the 2004 L. L. Winthrop/PEN Poetry Award and a *Los Angeles Times* Poetry Book Prize Nominee. Allen has received a 2005 Pushcart Prize. In various years, he has been a regular reviewer for *The American Book Review, The Hudson Review*, and *Poetry*. He has new poems forthcoming in *Poetry, The Gettysburg Review*, and numerous other periodicals.

P.S. Should you wish any more to draw from:

He is also the author of *Ode to the Cold War: Poems New and Selected* (Sarabande Books, 1997). Allen has received poetry writing grants from the NEA and Ingram Merrill Foundations. He recently quit college teaching in order to "write poems, listen to bluegrass and baroque music, and drive many times around America."