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Book Review: *Boy on the Step*

Patricia Clark
Grand Valley State University

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Book Reviews

Stanley Plumly, *Boy On The Step*, New York: The Ecco Press, 1989.

Ezra Pound, in his well-known essay "How to Read," makes the statement that "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Perhaps that explains one of the difficulties in reading poetry—the reader has been trained to read for information, for content, and the poet is up to something else. The poet Richard Hugo, my teacher years ago in Montana, often said that philosophy majors were his worst creative writing students. Why? They had an idea they wanted to get across. Hugo would laugh his belly laugh and say, "If you have an *idea* you're trying to communicate, send a telegram."

A master of charged language and the tangents of metaphor, Stanley Plumly chooses an apt epigraph for his sixth book of poems, *Boy on the Step*: "Woe unto him that saith to the wood, awake." The tree, both living and dead, is a central image in this volume of poems, one in which Plumly, in a sense, dares to explore the sacred "wood" if not actually "wake" it. And the sepia photograph on the book's cover gives a further clue to the importance of the tree. A small crowd of men and boys lounges in and around a touring car, which sits in front of a logging truck loaded with timber. Streamers wave from the logs, and a banner proclaims the "P. W. Plumly Lumber Corp." In poems ostensibly "about" nature, birds, sex, and memory (to name a few subjects), Plumly explores the dark side a child sees of his parents, their marriage, and the life and work that wears

them down to death, as well as the adult poet's view of his own mortality.

Arranged in three symmetrically balanced sections, the poems reveal Plumly as a lyric poet of both nature and the psyche. "Hedgerows," the opening poem of section one, describes a boy's walk in the country. The tone is casual, intimate: "Some trouble / or other would take me outside / up the town's soft hill, into the country. . . ." The walk is through names: "And everywhere the smell of sanicle / and tansy, the taste / of the judas elder, and somewhere / the weaver thrush that here they call mistle. . . ." Naming is therapy for the boy, in a sense, and also a way to a desired annihilation of the self. He would like to blend with nature, but ultimately finds that to be impossible. The boy must go back inside the house and face his troubles— "the turning of the year and the dead father."

Nature is more than a setting for Plumly. It becomes, as it did for the English Romantic poets, both a way of knowing and a teacher. In "Analogies of the Leaf," which follows "Hedgerows," nature leads the poet from the stars, their shaped constellations, to the leaf. The leaf's analogy is the hand, and the tone here is one of loss, for all the things the hand fails to catch. In lovemaking, touching another person, one cannot completely know the other: "The story of the body / is endless interiority. . ." Though the "spirit" passes between the lovers, something mysterious remains unknowable, untouchable. It is a similar mystery to that which nature, and trees, keeps. Though it engenders a sense of loss in the poet, it remains, too, a

source of wonder.

The section closes with “Toward Umbria” and “Birthday,” both of which foreshadow the poems to come. In “Toward Umbria,” a foreign landscape reminds the speaker of boyhood places with thistles everywhere. The speaker perceives nature as fixed, and humans as the ones adrift:

We are drift and flotsam,
though sometimes when we stop to look out over
the landscape, outcrops of limestone and a few
stone sheep, the ground itself seems torn,
and when we drive along the white glide of the
river,
the high wheat grass like water in the wind,
someone in joy running from the house,
the story is already breaking down.

The poem ends with an image Plumly repeats later (in “The Foundry Garden”), of a figure coming toward him from the horizon—“someone we knew and almost loved, or loved, / for whom this moment is equally awkward. . . .” It seems to be the haunting figure of the father.

“Birthday” catches a moment when “light stacked up like scaffolding” brings the man back to a boyhood time. Remembering the father, the speaker ends the poem on a positive note (the father lifts him “like a discovery, out of this life”), though the speaker also remembers being scolded by the father for “so much looking at the ground.” The emphasis on memory, on the father again, and the mixed pleasure of loss and love, prepares us for the second section.

The first section of *Boy on the Step* is dominated by poems filled with the lush imagery of nature, and the second section continues such imagery but adds darker subtexts of trouble, both at home and in the world of work. Here Plumly is at his finest, layering image and memory in poems that

explore subconscious depths. The section opens with “Cloud Building” and “Infidelity,” both hinting at trouble, neither explicitly stating whether the boy’s fears were justified or not: “All night there’d have been / an anger in the air, terror of voices, threats, / the argument half dreamt, then calm, / then the hard doors shutting / into sleep and cold and waking with the sun.” That is the opening of “Cloud Building”; its somber close makes a distinction between the “sentimental old,” telling stories, and “children, who in solitude have silence.”

“The Foundry Garden” and “Men Working on Wings” are two of the section’s finest poems. In the former poem Plumly does a masterful job of describing the Dante-esque hell of factory work in rural Ohio, where he grew up. It is his father’s workplace, the place that destroyed his health and killed him, finally, and the speaker’s growing understanding of what his father endured results in a powerful poem. The poem’s title captures the paradoxical heart of the poet’s work—making a “garden” out of what was an industrial wasteland: “then the light across the long factory of the field, the split and rusted castings, / across the low slant tin-roofs of the buildings, across fallow and tar and burnt potato ground. . . .” The speaker is nearly overcome, at one point, in a rush of empathy: “The times I can taste the iron in the air, the gray wash like / exhaust, smell the burn-off, / my eyes begin to tear, and I’m leaning against a wall, short of breath, / my heart as large as my father’s, alone in such poverty my body scars the light.”

Despite the emotional intensity here, Plumly always refuses sentimentality. In “Above Barnesville,” he writes: “Deep autumnal nights I imagine my parents lying side /

by side on the good grass looking up at the coal-and-diamond dark, / as they will lie together the rest of their lives.” The speaker is matter-of-fact about the inevitable. After his parents’ deaths, the speaker can imagine them reconciled, the father “turning toward my mother.” And the parents inhabit, in a sense, aspects of nature they loved—the father in the dust of the road, the mother in snow she would “watch . . . for hours, letting it fall.”

Section two closes with “Fountain Park” and “With Stephen in Maine.” Both seem to reach for, and achieve, I think, a kind of peace with death, with pain passed from generation to generation, with inevitable losses. “Fountain Park” is like a beautiful watercolor, with a park and graveyard described in a kind of watery green and gold. The first stanza closes with this view: “I can’t remember when the fountains worked, / spread like all the other cemetery / sculpture into a city in a valley, / here and there the graveyard grass like pasture.”

The book’s last section is one of further reconciliation. Though “Victory Heights,” the opening poem, recounts a painful memory of being bullied, the poem’s title and other poems in the section seem to show the achievement of distance from pain and hurt. The poet seems to have found a degree of acceptance, a way of tolerating the painful juxtapositions and ironies of life.

In “Argument and Song” the speaker sits with his now-blind mother in the gloomy half-dark. There is a kind of comradeship between them, despite tensions: “I will never have a child. / You know this with an almost kindness / or anger. . . .” Individuality means separation from others, and from the mother. Any greater loneliness is possible only in death: “. . . I knew I would need a

witness / and would fail, and that any / other loneliness / than this would be impossible.”

In the fourteen sonnet-like sections of the book’s title poem, and the last poem, Plumly makes a collage of memories, from boyhood again to the present. Though the poet’s childhood seems, at times, to be utterly timeless, at other times it is explicitly post-World War II America. Men perform their hard labor, and women tend to the children. The child is often an onlooker, standing in a crowd, listening to stories. The stories need repeating, endlessly, the way leaves on a tree need attention: “Someone has gathered all the red ones / he can find—he’s going to look at them one by / one.”

It is a caring attentiveness, finally, that Plumly celebrates. Storytellers repeat their lines, the poets make their images, and it is all done in the service of memory: “Those pictures . . . will / be the work of a god whose gift is the moment / lost or past, passed on to children of memory.” *Boy on the Step* intends to leave us with those lasting pictures, painted with the charged language, a poet’s lyric language, referred to earlier by Ezra Pound.

Patricia Clark