

BOOK REVIEW

Brief Passages, a review of *Fellow Survivors*

Pete Mlandic

Fellow Survivors

Al Maginnes

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but it seems clear now that we are
brief passages bound only by the framing
artifice of music, of speech and geography,
the invented ways of tying
one life to another,
of denying
the silence each note falls to (*Where Late the Sweet Bird*)

From its author comes the idea that people are brief passages, not a negative but a positive, a human life is brief so make the most of it. A person is vulnerable and resilient, names a person lives in and around are fluid but also have the staying power of names chiseled in stones, which

eventually crumble. These poems with their staying power evoke the evanescence of people, places and things.

People are here, and manifest their presence in work, fate, and exultations of the moment, the after it's over and the before it begins; electricity, carpentry, being a father, a husband, a son, a writer, a non-drinker who knows the highs and lows of alcohol, a lover of blues and jazz, a skeptic of things worth being skeptical about, cognitive of what is, of what was, curious of what might be; a person familiar with the warehouse, the construction site, the classroom, the rent house, the bar, the winding road, the train tracks, the river, the engine under the hood of a car, the heavy curtains of the big screen theatre, the silences of the AA meeting, and mostly the blood that courses through a person's veins, and heart. The poet brings all he knows and does not know about human lives into well wrought poems. Love of life counters fear of death. In "Legend" he says "faith is what we have left once we survive."

The evanescence of places is evoked in "These Accidents." The situation is people get lost looking for a house that has a party. It is night.

No matter how far we drive
how lost we get, we carry
the map of insufferable humanity
the will to survive no matter
the cost.

Again, the significance of place is noted in "Prayer for the Imponderables," when where the phrase "here so briefly" appears. And in "Self Portrait in the Amnesia of Fire" "we are mostly small images and their erasures."

Things in their thingness, their contexts of person and place, appear in all their brevity. A guitar in "Love in Vain" in which a person watches a train move down the tracks and there's "a glow to turn all desire to ash." Thingness and the evanescence of things is accented in "The

Wax Cylinder”, a poem about Walt Whitman’s only recorders words, a poem that concludes, “a universe still beautiful in its mystery.” The word “still” jumps out, still beautiful after the wax cylinder and the room it was in are gone, and perhaps even after the books in libraries with Whitman’s words are gone, and the tattoos on flesh, like the words love and hate tattooed on the fingers of a boy in “Hard Luck”— “he vanished like he was never there at all.” This is a poem about the boxer Jerry Quarry, a ring warrior whose career was “here so briefly,” and who made his mark.

First, the fist. The flat-knuckled hand, work scarred, lettered with
India ink and a sewing needle, a letter on each finger

so his fists spelled Hard Luck, mantra for the low punches
and cheap shots life deal out. The busted straight,

the dice that come up snake eyes, bad jobs, aching knees. Layoffs.

All the small ranges channeled into teaching his sons

The rings he fought in gone, but what he did can’t be undone. People can hold onto things, and things in these poems: the muzzled bear, the warped pool cues, burning vinyl, the Moyers film of Stern, tattooed fingers, canoeing in a storm, the spice in a latte, snakes in churches, caves, storms, a classroom’s assigned readings, a small town’s obituaries; and people of note: the pianist Bill Evans, blues man Robert Johnson. In “Einstein’s Violin” —“we have all come awake/ to a voice that stopped/ just as our eyes opened.” And in “The Conversions of the Body”—“how we transform into bodies shaped for the journey ahead.”

About the content: The poet extracts ideas from things and situations. The constant motion, the circular journey within the self—makes one think of stars and horizons and the mortar between bricks, and grass that needs to be mown and the thief who’d steal the

lawnmower. A car's oil pan, a night's fireflies. A steamroller flattens fresh asphalt. The poems make one think of always: what was, is and will be: matter, particles, gravity, ether; and think of the fleetingness of things and lives. They make one think of names, silences in songs. People who don't want to be lied to, and liars and everyday heroes. People, places, and things come together in the long narrative, the book's centerpiece "Dry Glass Blues."

About the form: The imagery and sound conjure the eye of Ted Williams in the batter's box, the ear of Miles Davis playing a track for Sketches in Spain. The persistence of Jerry Quarry stepping into the ring coexists with the inventiveness of Edison, the wonderment of Einstein, Walt Whitman's voice in his one recording in existence, and Janis Joplin's Mercedes Benz. There are the rituals of taking an old dog for a walk, telling a young daughter a bedtime story, and stopping time for a while, with a loved one in bed. Tenderness, humor, anger, sadness, the joy in listening to music, the pain of having an opponent crash into a player's knee on the gridiron.

What about tomorrow? The poet's guess is as good as yours. From "Storms That Make Their Own Names"—"it's always too soon to tell." One thing is clear: Al Maginnes is writing some of the best poems being written today.

About the Author

Peter Mladinic's poems have appeared in Neologism, The Mark, Bluepepper, The BeZine, Ariel Chart, 433 and other online journals. He lives in Hobbs, New Mexico.