

Review

Susan Firer, *The Laugh We Make When We Fall*, Omaha, NE; The Backwaters Press, 2002, 67 p.

Reviewed by Thomas R. Smith

As the title of Susan Firer's fourth collection of poems suggests, even the most grievous events of life—in this book, the deaths of a parent and a sister—aren't enough to quench the fire of this fine, original poet's exuberance. Indeed, there is a kind of laughter in the very language of these poems that softens the "fall" of the human condition as seen through Firer's eyes. That fall notwithstanding, this is a book not of the graveyard but of the Garden: ". . . whenever I see a tended garden, / I can't help it: I always assume the person who / made it has some deep acquaintance with despair."

Firer, who teaches at UW-Milwaukee, has maintained an amazing consistency in her writing since her first book, *My Life with the Tsar and Other Poems*, appeared in 1979. Her typical excess seems to be the overflow of a high-spirited and rebellious vitality. Her style is rooted somewhere between the Beats and the surrealists without actually belonging to either. We hear her essential, wild music in "Opening the Rain":

We return covered with the carnivalesque rains' information. We're always up for a miracle: a godbath, an unraveling of the dead. Out the window the fire-epauletted blackbirds perform lake aerial acts, architectures of desire and destruction. . . .

She knows her obsessions and, more importantly, how to draw energy from them and make them seductive to her readers. Many recent poets with larger reputations than Firer's have ended up sacrificing feeling to verbal cleverness, or vice versa. Firer does neither. As a poet, she has it all. Several homages in this book make clear that Whitman has taught her some of his gorgeous "too much"-ness, and in her poem about hearing a recording of Whitman's voice, she is both

warm and extravagant in a way Old Walt himself might have admired:

And if you are very still when listening,
you can hear him rubbing lilacs
in his beautiful, white beard, & I swear,
you can hear him swallow a strawberry.

Firer's previous book, *The Lives of the Saints and Everything* (1993), gave fullest expression to her ambiguous fascination with the saints who populated her Catholic girlhood. I would argue that there is also something deeply Catholic in the "carnavalesque" tendency of her imagination to turn ordinary events into celebrations, sights into visions, secular days into holy-days. She constructs each poem as a night-lit word-fountain crazy with Gaudi mosaic.

The force of her language seems to pressure the dull coal of experience into diamonds. Pumpkin seeds are "bright as brainjewels," lilacs become "the only flower with enough / fragrance to convert everyone / in the city to crime," and a recut ballroom dancing coat of her mother's is "a passport, a jail cell, an inky humid forest," among many other things.

Almost every line in *The Laugh We Make When We Fall* contains some vivid sound play. Firer loves rhyme, slant-rhyme, alliteration and all the other devices that make poetry stronger and more hypnotic than regular speech. She is also a connoisseur of vowels. Try saying aloud this delicious sequence which pulls in almost every major vowel sound before climbing the stairway of the last line to the romantic bedchamber of the word "beautiful":

I am trying to tell you something
about night games,
about the soul's regattas,
and the weight of skin.
Have you ever done anything beautiful?

The Laugh We Make When We Fall establishes its thematic ground in scenes and settings of the poet's life, flirting with the domestic while claiming a basic strangeness at odds with daily life or perhaps with taking daily life for granted. The body, nature, religion, and family all form the soil the exotic flowers of these poems grow from, like seeds blown in from another world taking root in a back

yard in Milwaukee. Certain poems — "Peonies," "The Horse Latitudes," and "Whitman's Voice" especially—are tours de force, but all are worthwhile and offer some richness Firer has harvested from her fidelity to a brave, flamboyant and independent sensibility.

To order: The Backwaters Press, 3502 North 52nd Street, Omaha, NE 68104-3506, \$14 includes postage.

Workshops

DyAnne Korda and Patty Dreier will be conducting a writing workshop "Earth Whispers: A Writers' Retreat" at the Central Wisconsin Environmental Station (20 miles east of Stevens Point) on Friday, January 10 through Sunday, January 12. Events include original writing prompts, sensory activities, and snowshoeing. For more information phone 715-824-2428 or email cwes@uwsu.edu. The fee of \$150 includes lodging, hearty meals, and snowshoes.

Norbert Blei will be conducting a workshop "Getting Inside the Poem" on Saturday, January 18, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in Room C-101 of the Commons Building at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha. The workshop is for poets who may feel their work may be in a rut or would like to try another approach. This one-day workshop is designed to take stock, energize self-expression, and explore new directions. The process includes: what it means and what it takes to write a deeper, more interior poem; the study of particular American, European, Latin American and Scandinavian poets; and the continued search for subject and idea within the poet's personal experience, through common language, image, and form. To register: Send a \$50 check made out to Norbert Blei. Mail to: Prof. Cecelia Rodriguez, Department of Languages, University of Wisconsin-Waukesha, 1500 N. University Drive Waukesha, WI 53188. Bring a spiral notebook (standard size), at least one recent poem, and (optional) current writer's journal. Norbert Blei, who teaches regularly at the Clearing in Ellison Bay, is a novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist, journalist and painter. He is editor-publisher of Cross+Roads Press and a frequent guest on Wisconsin Public Radio.