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## Against Sunset

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## Against Sunset

by Stanley Plumly

New York, NY: Norton, 2016, 112 pp. \$25.95. (Hard-cover)

What mad lover of poetry can't relate to these practically laugh-out-loud lines: "I'm standing at the grave / of Keats, wondering what to steal, token Keatsiana..."? And who can't help but savor the image of "Constable-size clouds" or "morning rags of rain"? Or be charmed by the opening lines of "Manhattan": "A man on the sidewalk, lying down / eyes straight up, smiling, an astronomer"? These are just some of the pleasures tucked into Stanley Plumly's latest volume of poetry, *Against Sunset*.

As the title suggests, elegy runs rampant through this volume, but it's not a railing against loss and the final darkness so much as a singing out of what is still possible and perhaps what is *only* possible with aging. It's a book crowded with people—parents, historical figures (the Wright brothers, FDR), artists of various stripes, poets (the Romantics, of course, as well as Plumly's contemporaries and near-contemporaries)—and, to a lesser extent, animals, some trapped in the pages of a book (such as Audubon's birds). Crowded, but not noisy—that is the genius of a master poet.

In "Early Nineteenth-Century English Poetry Walks," a series of thirteen poems (rambles?), Keats meets Coleridge, and the two walk together at the elder poet's "alderman-after-dinner pace for near two miles." In that span, Coleridge "broached / a thousand things." In *Against Sunset*, Plumly delivers something of an equally satisfying rumination, covering everything from disappearing landscapes ("I miss the elms") to the "eternal" sleeping dogs of Erice (no mere "strays" from his Ohio childhood) to the nature of art and the creative process ("The need for names—to shape and map the glib amorphous earth"). Not to mention faith and religion, mortality, and the natural world.

What more could the indefatigable chronicler of Keats

possibly have to say about that poet? It turns out you can take some of Keats's prose, lineate it, intersperse it with some of your own lines—and voila!—have your own masterful “To Autumn,” charting the composition of the original poem. “Beauty” immediately follows, rounding out Part I. The poet drives through a winter landscape and catalogues all that he sees (an evocative catalog reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's eye roving over a landscape), then abruptly the poem ends mid-thought: “air on the windshield made clearer pushed—”

In contrast, Part II opens with a bit of levity—“What is the brick thinking, Louis Kahn asks”—which propels the narrator from “those bricked-up Methodist churches / of childhood” to “my mother's patient longing for the beauty of a house / the wolf inside the wind cannot blow down, / the weight of brick, the war of brick, the ruin of brick.” The poem, simply titled “Red Brick,” reminds us of what it means to write poetry: a random prompt, a memory triggered, then another and another.

It's not difficult to see nearly every poem in this volume as an *ars poetica*. In “My Noir,” we see the poet as a school-child who “...learned / the hidden art of paying no attention in favor of the windows,” and in “At the Picture Window” we have this: “When I was alive, when I was a daydream, / I'd sit in the window's three-cornered bay for hours.” This poet doesn't merely daydream; he *is* the daydream.

The Bishop-like “Beach Reading,” part of the four-part “Seasonal” series, offers another chance to see the poet's mind at work. From the onset, the poet's eye is acute, catching the “angles angling down on the ocean's broken surface” and taking in the entire scene (ocean, sun, horizon) and all that is in it (from the distant dolphins to “the moony children and the mothers” on the shore). We see the narrator searching for the perfect phrase, essentially asking, “What am I really seeing? How can I best convey it?” in these lines: “Then the loose scarring—or is it scarves?— / of thinning cirrus clouds floating on the light's / transparency.”

The next poem in that series, “I Have Been at Different Times So Happy,” delivers an admonishment, warning us to

guard against laziness and complacency in how we see and record what we see: the “sudden shapes of birds... / ...night starlings mixed with / house ‘citizen’ sparrows, countless until you count them.” That last phrase is startling in its clarity: we suddenly see the birds not as a mere flock but as individual birds, though, ironically, the narrator does not give us an exact count. Do we even know if the poet has heeded his own advice and counted the birds? Ultimately, it doesn’t matter; a poet’s point was made: he taught us how to see an ordinary thing in a different way.

That underscores another theme that runs through the volume: the central role of seeing. Seeing as discernment, including getting the physical details right (is it “scarring” or “scarves”?), is no easy task. In yet another poem about a natural guide (“Too Broad a Brush *The Field Guide to the Natural World of Washington, D.C.*,” which opens Part III), the narrator lets us know that it “can take a long time in a lifetime / to hear, to see a thing.”

Which may be why “Limited Sight Distance,” set at the time of the 9/11 attacks, is only now appearing in a volume of poetry. This tour-de-force of a poem at first looks and sounds more like prose, with its chunky verses (more paragraph than taut, elegant lines) and prosaic, story-telling opening: “That afternoon we’d finished up early, at about two-fifteen.” The narrator, in Italy, takes us through nine descriptive verse paragraphs, traversing the landscape in long, meandering sentences with no real urgency, before reaching a town where a “loud TV voice” from a nearby coffee bar “straightened my attention—I hadn’t heard an American amplified for quite a while.”

Then the unfolding reality, eventually slicing through disbelief: “Planes run into mountains, I thought, not buildings.... Then we saw what came to be known as the second plane swoop in and make its turn and crash.” The next verse paragraph opens, “This was live.” Exceedingly short and to the point, as not much else has been in the poem up to this point, this sentence gives way to a straightforward description of “tourists and locals” watching CNN, “bewildered, many in tears.”

Then, a bit of information delivered casually in the early, meandering part of the poem—how Bellagio sits “at the very tip of Punto Spartivento, ‘the point that divides the wind’”—reappears, this time landing with fierce emotional weight: “The point that divides the wind, the end of an island.”

Eventually flying back to New York, the narrator remembers seeing nighttime Manhattan on previous flights (“the whole lit beautiful ocean liner of it”) in contrast with this “interminable moment, at this sad distance ...only diminishment ...a void, a filled emptiness of still deadly ragged smoke staining and drifting into the open sky.”

Reading *Against Sunset* brought to mind the powerful late work of Czeslaw Milosz and Stanley Kunitz (“What makes the engine go? / Desire, desire, desire”). Plumly falls between these two in sensibility and scope—a fine place to occupy—“a third thing” perhaps between the great sweep of history and the deft intimacy and wild passion of the singular mind. His outlook remains firmly, as the final image of “the new day’s burning hours oh so slowly climbing” reminds us, the burnished Romantic’s.

—Jackie Zakrewsky