

21ST CENTURY BREAD BY LELAND JAMIESON

Reviewed by Steffen Horstmann

21st Century Bread, by Leland Jamieson

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Despite my biases, until recently I have not become much engaged with the status of a particular movement or school or mode of writing poetry—mostly because I’ve always felt excellent poets will find a way to be heard, however it is they choose to practice their craft. Also, perhaps, because as a reader it is an individual poet’s resourcefulness that interests me most. In recent times contemporary poetry has experienced a vast hybridization of styles that has led to the emergence of what Derek Walcott has termed the “idiosyncratic genius,” or to put it more plainly: the poet who resists a categorization, whose aim is a fascinating blend of spontaneity and verve. Some of the most tantalizing poets that have emerged out of this trend include Mary Jo Bang, Suzanne Gardinier, and Mary Ruefle. Many of these innovative poets still work (albeit sparingly) with traditional forms. The sonnet, villanelle, and sestina continue to be widely practiced. But it is the formalist (I would define a formalist as a poet who writes the majority of his or her work in forms) that is declining in number. This is a condition due in part to the perspective that has been growing for some decades now—that formal verse is outmoded, that it is much too concerned with artifice, that the speakers of its poems simply do not sound natural...This type of thinking persists despite the fact important books (that have achieved critical acclaim) of formal poetry are still being written with some regularity. The past decade or so has seen the publication of Robert Pack’s *Rounding it Out*, Jared Carter’s *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*, Rhina Espaillat’s *Rehearsing Absence*, as well as Willis Barnstone’s massive volume of sonnets, *The Secret Reader*. But Pack, Carter, Espaillat, and Barnstone are all established poets. It was the recent publication of Leland Jamieson’s *21st Century Bread* that has marked an all too rare occasion—the release of a volume of formal verse by a new voice.

The title of Jamieson’s book implies the hope for worldly reconciliation. Many of the poems have an artistic or literary focus. “Breaking Light” is a poignant piece about a moment of recognition between artists; and “Painter’s Dimension,” written in rhyming couplets (AB AB AB), has to do with the challenges and joys of the creative process. There are also some philosophical pieces, such as “Kingdom’s Lies,” “Archimedes’ Second Thought,” and “Philosophy 101 in a Difficult Lie,” that are a nice blend of seriousness and wit. The strongest poems in *21st Century Bread*, though, are about Jamieson’s more personal experiences—as in “The Banyan,” which reveals in its final line a six-year-old boy’s concealed strife. I’m not certain anyone who hasn’t stood in front of a banyan tree can fully appreciate its actual dimensions, its uncultivated grandeur. Its shape evokes a sense of mystery and strangeness, making it a powerful presence in this childhood poem. Some of the finest poems of memory in this collection include “Rapture in the Sun,” “Jalopy’s Gift,” and “Ocracoke.” Each of these poems

possesses a conversational directness that provides them with a dimension of exactness, of a specified moment arriving at deepening insight. As the reader advances through *21st Century Bread*, it is impossible to ignore the powerful accumulation of sounds (of all the sonnets, tercets, couplets, and quatrains). Here are two of the more playful excerpts from this book's many metrical sequences:

from "Formal Poet as a Rooster":

*The horsehair bow of reading stress
contests each line—articulates
what's drawn across pentam or less
(tetram or trim)—and celebrates
new vibes that "free verse" can't express.
What un-taut string reverberates?*

from "Arcs of Quarks?":

*What is this pleasure, making poems
from tabula rasa, from scratch?
From void's deep nothingness, what homes
upon the sentient being's thatch?
What lights it like a flaming match
and would consume it—yet ignites,
with grace, these words by bits and bytes?*

These excerpts are from poems appearing in the final section of *21st Century Bread*, titled "Coda for Readers & Poets: Twelve Dances." The book's concluding poems are both humorous and intimate in tone, and are engaged with the practice of writing formal verse. I don't often involve myself much with an author's notes on poems (perhaps a symptom of my New Critical training), but Jamieson's extensive notes on this section are compelling—mainly because they give the reader insight as to just how poets may coax the seed of inspiration. This is a brief passage about Jamieson's approach to writing a poem: "I let a random rhyme word—possessing nothing but pure potential—lead me to an appropriate next line's imagery, action, feeling, or thought." Jamieson appears to have the ability to suppress the poet's typical preconception of a poem, and instead build it line by line, utilizing the form he has chosen to work with to present the poem with its subject. It is a fascinating process by which Jamieson has written an outstanding book. As I've said, I'm not much for the taking up of a particular literary cause, though lately I have become concerned by the near absence of books by emerging formalists. *21st Century Bread* is a volume of unusual unity and grace, and it is Jamieson himself who deserves the final word:

"Hearthstone in the Watershed":

*Hiking in Connecticut. Early Spring.
For M.B., with thanks for the crow.*

*This watershed is laced with walls of stone
hardscrabble farmers clanged with plough, dug up
by “Gee!” and “Haw!” and dragged to bound fields blown
so bare by winter no crows swooped to sup....
A tulip tree well-past a hundred years
ago took root within this cellar hole
beside a hearth where once moms roasted ears
of corn and simmered chowder, bowl on bowl.*

*The love of place—that fell away as they
exhausted all its soil, burned every tree,
their kids rode west and elders died away—
feels present still in moss-green stone debris,
in frost-felled hearthstone...sun its only heat.
We sit on it, and rub our weary feet.*

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