THE RIGHTNESS OF THIS LIGHT

by Lynn Pedersen

Richard St. John, *The Pure Inconstancy of Grace,* Truman State University Press, 2005, 84 pages, paper.

The Pure Inconstancy of Grace, Richard St. John's first collection of poems, is a book of possibilities. His art spans many subjects and places, as the titles of the poems suggest: "Circling Walden Pond," " J. Paul Getty at Forest Lawn," "The Grecian Urn Responds," and "Epiphany at the Dennis Public Dump." Art, marriage, friendships, terminal illness, and grief are all explored. "For a Friend Turning Thirty" illustrates his sense of time and history, of objects existing not just in contemporary thought and space but also in a larger context. St. John juxtaposes the industrial and suburban landscape of Toledo, Ohio—"famous, in a small way, / for fiberglass" and "the plastic wading pools / in our backyards, our power mowers"—with an exhibition of Dutch still-life paintings:

> In the handle of that knife
> resides the weight of hundreds of others
> held and set aside, seen and remembered,
> rendered and rerendered, seen. It takes an eye
> you don't have at eighteen to paint like this.

Objects in St. John's work, such as this knife, are not simply objects; they are metaphors for the passage of time, vessels that hold a personal and cultural history. What is essential in the paintings is "the rightness / of this light, spilling through a goblet / and onto a linen cloth; one's sense / that the curve of this pewter platter had to be." Painting here is equated with seeing—not just the everyday objects around us but their deeper meanings and associations. When the paintings are described as "works of grace," it is domesticity that embodies grace, and also this incongruous epiphany—the gift of finding these treasures so unexpectedly.

Sight is the major sense explored in his poems. In "This Light," a poem dedicated to a friend dying of cancer, light takes on multiple qualities: "Some days it falls / hard and fluorescent / as that x-ray screen. /

Some days it's gold / and soft and still." The poem concludes with an observation:

> Perhaps it's the pure
> inconstancy of grace—
> this light—each instant new,
> that frees us to begin
> another version
> of that half carafe
> of water by your bed
> and spindly wooden chair.

What's interesting is the way in which the poem redefines light. It is at first a tool for the medical diagnosis of cancer, then literally sunshine, then a metaphor for grace. The poet's view of grace is best described as a heightened consciousness that differs from a state of everyday awareness, a moment of clarity or spiritual vision that leads to new ways of seeing. But there is another image at work here, too. The poet has represented the scene as a still life, the half carafe of water and wooden chair reminiscent of the Dutch paintings. The carafe becomes a symbol of renewal, of that rendering that will be necessary for the poet after the friend has died. This is one way that St. John uses imagery. His language is not always figurative, but he uses words to paint a scene that becomes a metaphor in itself.

Of the 29 poems in the book, more than a third are dedicated to friends or family, some of them written as elegies ("The Way the Spheres Must Move," "The Darkened Mosaic," and "Christmas Requiem"). When it comes to relationships, there is a richness to St. John's experience that translates to the page. Much of the wisdom he explores in his writing comes with age. In "Praying in the Dark, Age 50," the speaker holds in his hands the skull of a deer his wife brought home and contemplates the end:

> Make no mistake, this
> is where we're going:
> the pristine bone,
> the empty brain case,
> the jaw half gone.

It is the frankness of these short lines that is so engaging. St. John's voice is straightforward and confident, his phrases careful and measured; but most

of all, he doesn't look away from what's unpleasant or frightening. The skull in this poem is similar to the knife in "For a Friend Turning Thirty," in this case a metaphor for death and a literal representation of both the past (the life of the deer) and the future (the death of the speaker). Yet the poem makes an interesting turn. What could be viewed as a state of despair or bleakness—"we've reached the end, / the black and lapidary / heart of things"—is actually a meditation on mortality and impermanence that ends with a sensual image. In the face of this darkness, it is the speaker's relationship with his wife that offers sustenance: "The darkness here / is almost intimate," and then later he continues:

> The deep earth
> shifts and breathes.
> Bedrock, fittedness.
> I follow unseen water down.
> I kiss you in the dark. I drink.

The choice of "lapidary" adds an unexpected tension, a dark glimmer of truth.

St. John's poems move by point and counterpoint, the play of his perceptions. What carries the reader is curiosity and an engagement with the way St. John views the world. This poet has the eye of an artist for detail, for framing the way a reader visualizes a scene. In "Annunciations," the speaker recounts that during a trip to Florence, "a girl I hadn't intended / is entering the frame. She steps into the space / of Fra Angelico's most famous fresco." But as in St. John's other poems, the literal is a point of departure for something larger:

> But what I wonder is, the real question
> in all these Annunciations: Will she say "yes"
> to the God within her? That unknown something
> she might, at her best, become: just barely
> a hunch, an intuition, and so ill-formed—
> what a bastardish thing it looks like now.

The girl acts on the scene like a glimmer of light, entering as unexpectedly as grace; she also triggers a moment of introspection in the speaker. The "real question" of the poem is not one of morality so much as one of consciousness and meaning, "that unknown something" one is capable of

becoming. By implication, the reader wonders how the speaker in the poem has answered the "real question," lived up to his or her own potential. The poem reflects a self-knowledge that is St. John's strength. It is worth noting that while many of the poems in the book may be autobiographical, they are not simply recounting experience. The poems are primarily meditations on the human condition, and to read St. John is to have a sense of immediacy—the impression of being in the same room as the poet.

St. John is in awe of the complexity of the world. In "Walking with the Lady with Three Dogs," four lines summarize the delicate balance of things: "When you think about it, it's a wonder the world / holds together at all, things get built, our own self- / consciousness, much less a girder or a tower, doesn't fall away / to void." St. John has a yearning to know: he speaks in the poem "Banding" of "our imperfect knowing," using the migration of birds as an opportunity to consider how little one can be sure of in life, realizing "that many, many fail / on their long journeys. Yet how / unstoppable their call." The poem concludes with an acceptance of the unknown that reads like a prayer:

> And may we learn
> what can't be known:
> this one warbler,
> heart beating, on its back
> in this cupped palm.

This thirst for knowledge echoes the epigraph for another poem in the book, "The Darkened Mosaic," a quotation from W. B. Yeats: "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it."

Richard St. John's *The Pure Inconstancy of Grace* is a gift of sight. There is so much hope in these pages, even in the deep pain of friends lost to suicide or terminal illness, or in a marriage's stormy weathering with the passage of time. Everywhere St. John looks—a painting, a woman walking her dogs, a carafe, a skull—he sees possibility, "these works of grace—incongruous / and unexpected. And yet, undeniably, here." St. John has crafted a volume that rewards the reader with its wisdom and its frankness, its meditations on the universality of human experience.