
Dark Side of North, Anthony Abbott’s eighth and final poetry volume, is, as Jacqueline Bussie observes in her “Foreword,” “a dying poet’s last gift to us” – a collection of more than ninety previously unpublished poems organized into seven self-contained books, which collectively form what Abbott describes in the “Acknowledgements” as “a unified manuscript about the last twenty years of life, and how we deal with diminishing health, retirement, changes in living, losses – how we maintain our joy for living in the midst of these challenges.”

Even before we begin our journey through the collection’s seven books, the title poem, which stands alone as the Prologue, offers us a brief glimpse of what is to follow. Set in the present, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, Dark Side of North captures the essence of this strange “upturned world” of “hurricanes without rain” and “tornadoes without wind” – a world where “college students frolic on the beach” while “trucks with bodies” line “the streets outside the hospitals” and “On Palm Sunday, the Pope spoke / alone to an empty Saint Peter’s Square.” Yet amidst the confusion and uncertainty of the time, there are signs of hope: “azaleas pink / and white quiver in the breeze,” the “cherry blossoms smile to the empty paths,” and “the fingers of love beckon through the greening leaves.”

In many other poems too, Abbott is an astute observer and interpreter of the world around him, finding joy and inspiration even in the smallest and most familiar things: “the April sun slanting through the new leaves” (“A Poem for My Daughter on Her Fiftieth Birthday”); “the smooth river flowing by / and the click of the oars as the crew wheels /made their way along in perfect rhythm” (“What the Prefects Would Never Know”); “the naked branches / of the trees the sound of humming, the whirr / of wings” (“All Saints’ Day”); “the fading light of evening / sky pink in the west” (“Even the Grass”); “the crescent moon / sharp against the clear black / night” (“Suppose”); “leaves / yellow and red and orange, / which floated slowly down / into our waiting hands” (“The Long Afternoon”); “Half-moon high in the night sky / sliding upward from the cover / of trees” (“Half Moon”); “the gold crowned kinglet” perched “in the pines” (“The Light in the Window”); a luna moth “slowly, tentatively / then surely, / rising / into the sweet / June air” (“Grace”); “the circling / hawk who bends to the shimmering pool / and dives” (“The Crazy Man Visits the Zoo”) – and all the other moments “we wait for live for” that impart “to all life / the aura of the mysterious, the sacred, / blessed and consecrated by the heart” (“That Without Which”).

More often than not, these images of the beauty and sublimity of the natural world are inseparable from remembrances of its human inhabitants, especially those Abbott memorializes in an effort to fulfill what he describes in his essay “In His Own Words” as one of the poet’s most important roles: “to find words to keep . . . alive in our hearts” the “people who would otherwise be lost.” Some of the most poignant of these elegiac moments occur in Part One: The Book of Remembrances and Grace, which includes “love poems” addressed to his daughter Carolyn, who died unexpectedly at the age of four (“A Poem for My Daughter on Her Fiftieth Birthday” and “Lyn’s Poem”), his sister Nancy, his “true mother, . . . teacher, . . . protector,” whom he imagines at her death wrapped in an angel’s “bright wings,” transported to “where that brightness is” (“The Light in the Window”); the calculus teacher who lives on in the memory of all who knew him, “walking home toward us all, telling us / to live” (“Even the Grass”); and numerous other beloved friends and family members.

In other sections, too, there are poems that “keep alive in our hearts” both those who have died and those near death like the dialysis patients described in “The Book of Driving” and “A Day with the Doctors.” Other moments “we wait for” include “the cherry blossoms smile to the empty paths,” and “the fingers of lovebeckon through the greening leaves.”

PASSAGE TO WILDFLOWER IN THE WIND

“\nEven the Grass”

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without wind” – a world where “the trees’
in the night sky” – a source of beauty and wonder in earlier poems—now elicits only a brief glance: “I stand on the deck / and look, then close the door / and go to bed. No more of this.” In “Quite the Opposite” he views his current state as “these odd days edging into the ether world” and himself as this stupid old man who begins for once more, and gets instead these odd days, as I say, . . . these doddering edgings into sleep into the wax figures of dreams.

In “The Nameless,” people once familiar . . . drift in and out of namelessness, caught for a moment in a bright flash of light, then gone again for months at a time drifting with other forgotten down the green streams of the lost.

And in the last of the twelve poems in The Book of These New Days, “The Man Who Reads the Newspaper,” a man much like the poet, once happy and attuned to all the things around him, now . . . stares out the window and wonders how he will spend the day.

It will be too cold to walk. He will read his biography and look up the unknown words on his smart phone, the last places of the heart dim in the haze of another dawn.

Ultimately, the sense of sorrow and loss that permeates The Book of These New Days recedes as the poet embarks on the last stage of life’s journey in The Book of the Last, where each poem is an invitation to learn “what the heart knows” and all that it teaches us (“What the Heart Knows”). To be thankful for the gift of life / and the small birds who drink / from the pool outside your window” (“Do Not Forget This”). To give thanks for the rain / which soaks the roots of the trees / and gives life again to the small / plants and the nameless purple / wildflowers the mowers have missed” (“Rain”). To savor every moment as it “opens like a gift” in “the stunned silence / of here and now.” To receive / each morning as a wrapped gift” (“The Last”). And to remember that “the last poem, the last linking / of lines . . . the last silence between words” is not really the last but because the words live on in the pages of Dark Side of North and the hearts of all who read them.

Costa Rican-American poet MARK SMITH-SOTO has been with the International Poetry Review at UNC Greensboro for almost thirty years. Along with three prize-winning chapbooks, he has authored three full-length poetry collections, Our Lives Are Rivers (University Press of Florida, 2003), Any Second Now (Main Street Rag, 2006), and Time Pieces (Main Street Rag, 2015; reviewed in NCLR Online 2016). He won the James Applewhite Poetry Prize in 2012, and his winning entry and another finalist were published in the 2015 NCLR issues. NCLR Online 2015 also featured him in an essay on North Carolina’s Latinx writers, and his poetry has also appeared in NCLR 2001, 2002, and NCLR Online 2012.

Smith-Soto’s work has been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize and was recognized in 2006 with an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing. His Fever Season: Selected Poetry of Ana Isturri (2010) and his lyrical memoir Berkeley Prelude (2013) were both published by Unicorn Press.