ON THE BUS WITH AL MAGINNES

a review by Jim Clark

Al Maginnes. *Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems.* Redhawk Publications, 2023.

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AL MAGINNES spent most of his career teaching at Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh. He earned his BA in English from ECU and his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas. He is the author of several poetry collections, including, most recently, *Sleeping Through the Graveyard Shift* (Redhawk Publications, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). Read an interview with him in *NCLR* 2007.

For some years now I've carried a small list of names in my head, poets, about my age (sixties), who it seems to me are due a "Selected Poems" collection. The wait is over for the poet at the top of that list, Al Maginnes, whose Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems is out from Redhawk Publications. A "Selected Poems" volume signifies several things and performs several functions in a poet's career. It indicates a certain level of achievement, a sense of the poet having fully arrived on the scene. In this volume Maginnes includes poems from about a dozen previously published titles. An impressive achievement, unquestionably. A "Selected Poems" also provides a summation of the poet's career to date, focused and enhanced by the editorial winnowing such a volume entails. The result is a curated showcase of the poet's best work for the initiated, and a handy, impressive one-volume introduction for the uninitiated. Finally, such a collection, especially if it contains new poems, as this one does, sets the stage for what is to come – the poet's continuing, mature work.

My acquaintance with Maginnes's poems coincides with my move to North Carolina in 1994 to teach creative writing and modern poetry at Barton College. Among the first lines of his I encountered are these from "The Angels of Our Daily Bread," a poem included in his first book, Taking Up Our Daily Tools (1997):

Beside the imperfect cobble of each task our tarnished and clumsy hands turn to rises the ghost of its conception, built in imagination's pure moment by the angels of our daily bread. This nearly perfect little Platonic reverie contains the merest whiff of Wallace Stevens in its depiction of the old holy war between Imagination and Reality. Replete with lovely phrases like "imperfect cobble." contrasted with the visceral sense of ornery English words supplied by the alliteration of lightly percussive "t" sounds, these lines have echoed through my brain for a quarter century. Here is a poet who knows what work is, I thought (and still think), and knows that despite being constructed from rough cobblestones, a poem can be an avenue to transcendence. I got on Maginnes's bus and, no matter how long or strange the trip, never looked back.

Yes, the Grateful Dead allusions are intentional. I am surely old enough to not worry about claiming that part of my lived experience. We all choose certain artists as guides, teachers, explainers, and bellwethers. They help us make sense of our experiences. When, as a young man, I encountered these lines by Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter in "Ship of Fools," "I won't leave you drifting down / But oh, it makes me wild / With thirty years upon my head / To have you call me child," I thought, I'm not the only one; someone else has been here before and experienced this same thing. It was clarifying, illuminating, and I felt I'd found a kindred spirit. This is what Maginnes's poetic voice provides for me. It's a lodestar by which I calibrate my humanistic gyroscope. I suppose that's a heavy load for a poet, but so be it.

Happily, this volume contains many personal favorites like the aforementioned "The Angels Fall 2023

of Our Daily Bread," along with the magnificent "Punishment" (which I shared with my students for years), "Elegy with Clifford Brown Playing the Trumpet," "Film History," "For a Glass of Red Wine," "A Broadcast from Flyover Country," "The Jesus Year," "Playlist for a Photograph of a Record Burning," "Stern," the marvelous poems of family and parenthood in *Inventing the Constellations* (2012), and the surprising but indispensable long narrative "From *Dry Glass Blues.*"

However, it's really the new poems that call to me, especially those displaying Maginnes's great gift of empathy. Is there a college professor in the trenches anywhere who doesn't react to a title like "Thirty Years of Teaching, No Sabbatical" with an involuntary shudder and a rueful laugh? After an extended meditation on "time's ability to erase itself / to inconvenience once the spell / of waiting is done" the speaker, with "two-thirds of a life spent / in classrooms," recollects the many semesters now behind him, peopled by students "who came every fall and spring to confront / syntax and punctuation, to let / their essays come limping forth, their shy poems / peeking from behind their legs." Now, with all the time in the world to devote to writing, he frets over his meager accomplishments: "So what if the language of birds eludes me?" Employing the everyday language of education, he celebrates the moment when the power of language visits its gift upon an unsuspecting teacher who passes it on to his students:

In the end

there will be a roster of things undone, but somewhere someone might recall an afternoon when I said something I had not known until I said it, a twist of thought that became true when words found it.

The teacher in the previous poem might well have been discussing the Beat poets when words found his first, best thought. Next we have Maginnes's own reckoning with those poets in the compelling narrative "Allen Ginsberg and the Purloined Bible." The poem begins with the speaker's confession that he missed his chance to see Ginsberg because, at the time, "I didn't love him enough when he walked the earth, gentle, / seem-

ingly immortal, to drive that distance" of three hours. The poem's funky, bohemian details should be familiar enough to any poet coming of age in the 1970s or '80s: Poetry in the Schools work, friends with a precarious grasp on reality, alcohol, mushrooms, cigarettes, cheap motels. In a strategically placed flashback, we see the speaker working menial jobs on "a college campus whose buildings resembled my idea of / medieval castle," using his lunch break to read "Kerouac - even The Town and the City – Corso, Bukowski, Snyder," and trying his hand at writing "my own half-made poems." By the time the speaker enrolls in college, his beloved Beats are superciliously dismissed by au courant professors eager for the next big thing. The speaker keeps at it, though, winding up in a graduate program where the teacher of his first literature course is coincidentally John Clellon Holmes, who regales the class with tales of Kerouac "coming to his house at three in the morning / bearing the now-famous scroll manuscript of On the Road." The speaker eventually finds a packet of mushrooms tucked into the pages of the Bible purloined from a seedy motel room by his friend Bailey and left at his house. After downing them, he has his own psychedelic epiphany reading Ginsberg's early imitations of Blake. As the poem moves toward its conclusion, we flash forward to 1994 when the speaker attends a writers' conference in Washington, DC: "I was in another hotel when / I heard that Allen Ginsberg had died." Many writers, myself included, very likely remember that writers' conference, that hotel, and hearing the news of Ginsberg's death, adding to the sense of inclusion and recognition that Maginnes's poems often elicit. The poem ends with the speaker putting on his token Jack Kerouac t-shirt before leaving, a modest ritual, instead of reading the verses Bailey read from the hotel Bible or chanting om mani padme hum, "something Ginsberg would have done. / But I was not Ginsberg. The universe

The memorable "Iggy Pop Died for Our Sins," perhaps the centerpiece of the new poems, contains several of Maginnes's favorite elements: pop culture references, music and musicians, youthful excesses, brushes with mortality, survival, redemption. The poem begins with the

had him now."

young punk rock icon Sid Vicious, bass player for the Sex Pistols, wishing to be like the older punk rock icon, Iggy Pop, lead singer for The Stooges. Vicious romantically (and mistakenly) views Pop as a deceased "martyr for rock and roll," and "would not be persuaded that Iggy was / thirty by then, living in Berlin, working / with Bowie on his third or fourth comeback." Pop, whose real name is James Osterberg, grew up in Ann Arbor, MI, and the speaker remembers a friend who also grew up there and "recalled Iggy shuffling around / in torn jeans and gold lame slippers / like your grandma might wear when / her bunions hurt." These contrasting depictions of Iggy – the self-destructive punk performer and the almost comical harmless neighborhood eccentric - constitute the heart of this meditation on life, mortality, and the choices of self-destruction and redemption. The speaker reveals that he has never seen Pop in concert, but "as long as Iggy and I are alive / there's hope." Pop offers a model of redemption for the adult speaker, who, as a young punk, "claimed 'Better living through chemistry' / and believed it," choosing as role models "Keith Richards, / Harry Crews, Bukowski" rather than the has-been Pop, "an anachronism by then." The speaker eventually must deal with his self-destructive tendencies, especially as his age begins to catch up with him:

The romance of the drug life evaporates and then it's just the drug and the withering veins. And I was never so in love with my own demise that I planned anything other than a long life.

Newly sober, he begins to view the "anachronistic" Pop in a different light: "and now I heard / not a role model but a fellow survivor, / someone whose tracks I could follow / even if he walked in gold lame slippers." Not surprisingly, this powerful poem contains the title of Maginnes's Selected Poems. Thinking of the extremes to which Pop would often go – "stage dive, smear himself / with peanut butter, roll in broken glass, / taunt bikers into beating the shit out of him" – the speaker realizes the need for an audience as an element in such behavior, "people who hoped / he would do those very things / so they could tell stories about



it later." Sid Vicious died shortly after declaring his mistaken admiration for Pop. The speaker comes to realize,

Destruction requires an effort, as well as someone to monitor the wounds, to warn how close you came this time and tell you not to do it again.

The poem ends with the realization, using the ambiguous pronoun "we," that: "We had to kill Iggy Pop / so we both could walk away." Who is the other, who justifies the plural pronoun? Perhaps the self-destructive persona of Iggy Pop created by James Osterberg. At any rate, at the poem's end, two fellow survivors walk away.

There's no doubt that this impressive collection announces that Al Maginnes has fully arrived. The book is also a fine showcase of Maginnes's best poems, and a tantalizing introduction to his work. But for those initiates among us who look to Maginnes and his poems to calibrate our internal gyroscopes and record our testudineous progression through the zeitgeist, this book only makes us hungry. Hungry for the next poem, the next dispatch from one who possesses one of the keenest antennae of the race, as Ezra Pound once defined the role of poets. We know that, come hell or high water, Maginnes is out there somewhere, working on a new poem. And we can hardly wait for it. ■