

## ON THE BUS WITH AL MAGINNES

*a review by Jim Clark*

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

**JIM CLARK** is Professor Emeritus of English at Barton College in Wilson, NC, where he was the Elizabeth H. Jordan Professor of Southern Literature from 2007 until 2019 and served as Dean of the School of Humanities. Some of his honors include the Randall Jarrell Scholarship, the Harriette Simpson Arnow Short Story Award, and the Merrill Moore Writing Award. He served as the President of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in 2015 and the Chair of the North Carolina Writers Conference in 2017.

**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

