LET US ALL BE HAPPY

a review by Janis Harrington

Ralph Earle. *Everything You Love Is New.* Redhawk Publications, 2024.

In this radiant collection, Ralph Earle travels through seven decades. He hitchhikes, drives coastal roads with hairpin turns, and takes bus and train rides to revisit his experiences as son, brother, husband, and father. We are delighted to share his journey through these generous, meditative, and gently humorous poems.

In "The School of the Patient Heart," a spiritual teacher tells a young Earle, "We are blank sheets. . . . Life writes its stories on us." Earle narrates his life's stories through the triple lens of poet, keen observer of nature, and seeker of the Absolute. The poems, rich with surprising metaphors and precise language, explore light and dark, reality and dreams, ego and pure consciousness, always in the pursuit of love. "Frog in a Cardboard Box" recounts how the poet and his young son once rescued a frog from their dry yard, then set it free by a stream: "The frog sat shining / on a slick rock, a jewel / received and given." Earle views his experiences, both joyous and heartbreaking, as moments received and given, asserting that we are all traveling "in a dream nobody chose" ("Before the Bus Stops").

Earle enjoyed a privileged childhood in Connecticut and Vermont, yet as a child he perceived race and class. In "Betty and Freddy Watch the Wrestling," his family's live-in maid watched television in her room at the back of their house after "the little white boys fell asleep." In "Betty Helps Out," the poet remembers, "We didn't talk to her much. / By day, she stood in the kitchen / ironing in an old white uniform." When Betty dies, Earle's father pays for her funeral, but his family doesn't attend, remaining on their side of the race and class line. In "How We Lost the Beehives," Earle's family returns home to find a "new apple man named Ruta" in charge of harvesting their orchard and the laborers enjoying a Dionysian harvest celebration:

> Men in soiled rumpled shirts
> stood in the orchard around tables
>
> that had appeared from nowhere
> heavy with food, and women
> in dresses with polka dots.
>
> We were witnessing a miracle:
> red wine in glasses, kisses, laughter,
> loud jokes, trees heavy with fruit.

Earle and his brothers, raised in a reserved Protestant culture, have never witnessed such an unrestrained and jubilant scene. What they believe to be "a miracle" is really the contrasting behavior of a different social class. Their disapproving father views the party as vulgar, and an act of trespassing. He has "a quiet word" with Ruta, then turns toward the house. Dismissed, Ruta grimaces, and his crew departs for good. The family is left with an untended orchard:

> Every spring brought fewer blossoms
> as the white-painted beehives faded
> and grew empty. One spring they were gone
>
> and my father taught us to play baseball
> among the apple trees and poison ivy.

Closing the poem with barren trees and poison ivy, Earle employs nature to express the toxicity of prejudice.

The poet's retrospective journey proceeds to marriage, fatherhood, middle age, a second partner, and his parents' deaths. Earle recounts these life stories with understanding gained by hindsight. Even when poems describe happy times, the images and vocabulary often portend coming darkness. In "West Virginia," Earle describes an innocent time early in his marriage:

> Lightning bugs rise
> toward the thunderheads,
> Ann and I on a blanket
>
> where the long grass ends,
> slow fireworks
> in the branches of our blood.
>
> Days carry us weightless
> as paper lanterns in the trees.
> Thunder beyond the ridges.
>
> Lightning bugs
> vanish like sparks
> on the wings of rain.

The young couple enjoys a summer evening. Yet the poem's only line that is a complete sentence, giving it emphasis, is "Thunder beyond the ridges." Past the horizon of what the couple sees, a storm is brewing. Lightning bugs, with their lovely, ephemeral glow, rise in the opening line, but vanish in the final stanza. The image of the

COURTESY OF RALPH EARLE

RIGHT Ralph Earle reading at Scuppernong Books in Greensboro, NC (2024)

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RALPH EARLE has lived in North Carolina since 1977. He earned a PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill, and later opened a bookstore in Sanford, operating it for six years before turning to a career in technical communications. His chapbook, *The Way the Rain Works* (Sable Books, 2015), won the 2015 Sable Books Chapbook Award. Twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, his poems have appeared in numerous publications including *The Sun*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and *Sufi Magazine*. He co-manages the Second Sunday Poetry Series at Flyleaf Books in Chapel Hill. After a career in technical communications, he currently designs websites for poets and other creative people.

couple as "weightless as paper lanterns in trees" suggests fragility and susceptibility to being blown off course. Nouns such as "thunderheads," "fireworks," and "blood" create tension. The poem ends with the word "rain." In this poem, and throughout the collection, Earle uses images from nature literally and metaphorically to communicate emotions or actions.

The difficult times foreshadowed do indeed arrive. In "Still Life with Chainsaw," Earle chooses a flock of birds as a metaphor for the startling way symptoms of his wife's mental illness appear seemingly out of nowhere, then as suddenly disappear: "first nothing, then black / specks flapping, then nothing. // Wheeling out of the blue sky / of what we expected." The verbs "flapping" and "wheeling" are unsettling and help express the couple's sense of powerlessness.

Another example of birds used as a metaphor occurs in "Chamomile." Instead of taxing his rational mind to figure out what to tell his son, the poet trusts his intuition to send him the right words as effortlessly as hearing the "cries of owls across the distance of evening."

In "To Another Single Father," Earle looks back on his marriage from the vantage point of years passed. We learn that Ann withdrew "to a nest feathered / with unread magazines, mail / cemented together by spilled tea," while he "launched a personal conspiracy / to believe she was well." The poet observes, "There is no word / for the way the water clings to leaves," employing the image of raindrops' adherence to leaves to describe how his makeup gave him no choice but to cling to the belief that his wife was fine.

Earle invites us to consider that every moment can brim with light, yet doesn't deny life's darkness and danger. In "Ruin and Radiance," he entreats the Divine, "Grant us the words to bear / your light in this world of shadow," and recognizes that we "cross the dark on a bridge of reed / between the ruin and the radiance." In "The Last Elm in Addison County," Earle is a boy strolling with his mother through a bucolic landscape, yet the poem concedes that "Shadows climbed the skirts of the mountains / one rocky ridge after another, even to the edge / of our own farm, even where we stood." Another poem, "When I Hitchhiked to Big Sur," paints an idyllic scene that turns into a life-threatening situation:

> Twenty miles down the coast
> under spring rainclouds
> we laid our sleeping bags
> on a deserted beach
> and told each other stories.
>
> A wild-haired stranger
> stumbled into our circle
> clutching a bayonet
> in a shaky hand and shouting
> about the flashback he was in.

Earle's compassionate gaze contemplates not just his life but the world we live in, with its chaos and cruelty. In "City of Thorns," he describes the Dadaab refugee camp, home to half a million Somalis, where "thin young people" post on Facebook and dream "about riding to an implausible senior prom on the shoulders of an elephant." He addresses the murders of Tamir Rice, a child with a toy weapon gunned down by police officers with real firearms, and Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old shot in Florida as he returned from a convenience store. In "Bring Me Back the Change," Earle sees that Trayvon "was too much like my son in his sullen hoodie, restless / as any teen," and admits "the difference is the privilege that color carries." Earle is unnerved on a walk home as an SUV follows him, then stops, and a black man emerges. He steps forward to meet the stranger who turns out to be his son's childhood friend.

Our country's political divisions also appear in the collection. The speaker in "Bisous" waits for "America / to walk off a cliff / clutching its red-white-and-blue / umbrella." "Signature of Extinction" laments the climate change calamity already here: "In our day the bees disappear, / salamanders and songbirds. We wonder why / insects fail to smack against our windshields / in this land we are leaving." Corporate greed and capitalism show up in the poems. In "Garth Brooks Plays Walmart," the speaker is reduced "to fingering off-brand golf balls / as I stand in the register line / and the terrible God of the Universe / . . . waits at the final check-out."

While Earle's poems encompass the darkness, he always seeks light and love, believing, as he states in "The Last Purple Blossoms," that "Love's threads will pull me through." He closes the collection with a benediction. A conductor moves through a train car calling out, "ladies and gentlemen / as we slowly take our leave of this world / so random and so transient let us all be happy." We are happy to have the company of these wise and luminous poems as we travel through our own lives. ■