

Book Review

The Hungers of the World: New & Collected Later Poems. By John Morgan. Salmon Poetry, 2023. 174 pp.

Reviewed by Dawn Macdonald

It's always a delight to see a poet reach the milestone of a *Collected Works*. John Morgan's *The Hungers of the World: New & Collected Later Poems* follows his *The Moving Out: Collected Early Poems* (Salmon Poetry, 2019), and includes a generous chapbook's worth of new material, along with selections from *Spear-Fishing on the Chatanika: New & Selected Poems* (Salmon Poetry, 2010), *River of Light: A Conversation with Kabir* (The University of Alaska Press, 2014), and *Archives of the Air* (Salmon Poetry, 2015).

Morgan is a deft handler of the sounds and sense of language, a plain-spoken singer in the style of the Roberts—Lowell, with whom he studied, and Frost, whose themes and rhythms echo in poems like “To a Solstice Party in Fairbanks,” where snowy woods on a winter evening provide the site for two diverging roads. Compare Morgan's lines, “as the day-long winter evening fades, / Orion riding shotgun on the night. // But driving isn't easy on the ice, / and up a snow-packed hill the engine falters ...” with Frost's little horse who “... must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near / Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year.” Later in Morgan's poem he finds himself in “an unfamiliar driveway,” but “backing slowly down the drive / I try the other fork ...” where he finds, not only his promised solstice party, but confirmation of the rightness of his choice of adoptive home—not unlike Frost who, confronted with two roads, so famously “took the one less traveled by.”

Often Morgan picks up rhymes from several lines above, from a previous stanza or from mid-line, and brings them out at the end in a way that feels fitting and satisfying without the *ba-dum ba-dum* of a more formal rhyme scheme. In “Mourning Cloak,” for example, we feel the closure in “dead” and “away” wrapping up rhymes opened two or three stanzas above: “... a shred // of night by day. I hear the buzz of bugs / awakening to spring and watch a busy / moth, ants trailing up a branch. Like gravediggers // who forge their drastic living from the dead, / we schmoozed and argued half the night away.”

All this fine control can feel oppressive at times, but there's a wildness pulsing under the surface of Morgan's neatly ordered lines, and a sly sort of humour. In the insouciant and whimsical piece "Palladium Seeds for Prostate Cancer," the author's medical procedure leads him into a gentle ceding of bodily control to the power of word and fable. In "Jetsam" the author's surrender of self is foreshadowed by his having his sweater on backwards. An outlaw in retirement takes time out to sip cocoa and think about cows and starscapes in "Time Off from Bad Behavior."

Among the new poems included in this collection we find two *zuihitsu*, a rambling, digressive style of prose poem described in the notes as "a kind of anti-haiku." Morgan's *zuihitsu* address some heavy topics—abortion, and a neurological event, respectively—but, thanks to the loose associations conjured by the form, are able to circle around these subjects with lightness and ease. In "On the Body: A Zuihitsu," the details of an episode of transient global amnesia share space with card tricks, an injured bird, family secrets, and the World Naked Bike Ride. In "The Abortion: A Zuihitsu," the author's father obsessively types letters to the editor at the *Times* while a teenaged friend seeks an illegal abortion and poets converse with one another in dreams.

Morgan is a connoisseur of the dream state and finds much practical material in his nightly excursions. A frog squats upside-down on the ceiling in a dream reported in "With My Son at Tennant Lake," disappearing when dislodged and causing a momentary panic. "The Battle of Austerlitz" takes the confusing state of dreaming that one has awoken, then waking again in actuality, and moves this into a meditation on dying. Other poems in which the author falls asleep or reports on dreams include: "The Abortion: A Zuihitsu," "Analects of the Red Canoe," "The Assignment: Harvard, 1962," "The Denali Wolf," "Jetsam," "Palladium Seeds for Prostate Cancer," and the long poem "River of Light: A Conversation with Kabir."

Aging and death permeate the poems in this book, presented as quietly observed natural phenomena alongside rivers and bluffs, butterflies and wolves. Diseases proliferate—people suffer seizures, tumours, amnesias, and bone fractures; a stranger passed on the road is missing lower limbs; lives are lost to suicide or to an unnamed final illness.

Several poems take the point of view of historical characters, including one long poem about (spoiler alert) cannibalism ("... who could wolf the man-flesh down? / ... such times you get / so famished thoughts have juice ..."). An ekphrastic poem "Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun: Self-Portrait" conjures the voice of the eighteenth-century French painter to reflect on the aftermath of the French revolution and her friendship with the doomed Marie Antoinette. Another ekphrastic piece covers Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait with Beret and Angst" (more

commonly known to art aficionados as “Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-up Collar”). “Lady Digby on Her Deathbed, 1633” imagines the circumstances surrounding the painting of Sir Anthony Van Dyck’s seventeenth-century necro-portrait of his friend’s wife’s two-days-dead corpse.

History, dreams, aging, death, and nature’s power merge in this collection toward an expression of a lifetime’s wisdom in the controlled voice of a poetic master. Gentle humour, amusing anecdote, and slant rhyme keep things light enough not to overwhelm. This is a book to return to again and again, for insight, for pleasure, and to relax in the company of an intelligent friend.

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