

Susan Firer. *Milwaukee Does Strange Things To People: New & Selected Poems 1979-2007*. The Backwaters Press, 3502 North 52<sup>nd</sup> St, Omaha, NE 68104-3506, 2007. \$16.

*Milwaukee Does Strange Things To People*, Susan Firer's fifth collection of poetry, includes two long sections of new work in addition to poems selected from her previous books, the third of which, *The Lives of Saints and Everything*, won the Posner Award. Firer, a professor at the UW-Milwaukee and a native of Milwaukee, has found inspiration in that city and its inhabitants throughout her career, though never more so: both new sections, "Hydromancy" and "Milwaukee Does Strange Things To People," celebrate in different ways a place that, as the title poem notes "is nicer than you could imagine, even/if MONEY MAGAZINE once rated/it 177<sup>th</sup> in the nation." First among the many admirable aspects of *Milwaukee* is its celebration, missing from so much contemporary academic writing, of the weird loveliness of unexpected, ugly, and some times even disturbing things, from girdles to dances with the criminally insane. Further more, Firer maneuvers expertly between two poetic poles throughout the collection: the plain-spoken and the self-consciously crafted. The book's first two sections seem divided along these lines: whereas the diction of "Hydromancy," which as its name implies focuses on water as a unifying image, is more poetic, more lyrical, more specialized—sometimes in a scientific way—and its poems crafted to foreground sonic effects, "Milwaukee Does Strange Things To People" more often employs casual, conversational diction, saving a special image or simile to close its more often narrative, visual, and character-based pieces.

The way Firer employs explanation—telling, NOT showing—in order to make her poems approachable is on display from the beginning of this book in the prologue poem "Hello Li Po," a poetic credo which also exemplifies Firer's fondness for the list as a poetic form. Note here how she includes the pronunciation of a difficult word—partly for humor, partly to extend a hand to the reader:

I believe only the dead are experts on mortality,  
that a man crossing the 21<sup>st</sup> Street bridge in fog  
will always look lonely,  
I believe the French Prose Poet with the video-game name,  
I believe Scriabin was a Synesthiast (sin-es-**thee**-zee-ast)

The most important statement in this poem is Firer's Whitmanesque belief in poetry's open-ended, if not infinite, expansiveness, "that poetry is a large house with many rooms."

The different sections of *Milwaukee* pace off a few of those rooms, and "Milwaukee Does Strange Things To People," foregrounds both ordinary diction and aesthetics in, for example, "Mrs. Post's 6<sup>th</sup>-Hour English Class," a longer, prose narrative about reading "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and breaking the rules about poetry one starts to learn around 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Here again Firer likes to tell, in a deliberately flattened voice, not just show:

It was summer. Wasps had flown

into our opened classroom windows.  
Girls waved hand-folded theme-paper fans;  
boys after lunch dozed.

Incorporating prose elements like dialogue into the poem, as Frost characteristically does, Firer, unlike Frost, takes pains to make this move *not* poetical through her asides about the story:

And that was when  
she posed the question: “What did Frost mean  
‘I took the one less traveled by  
And that had made all the difference’?”

Now, here, I believe we are close to the moment  
where I decide to be a poet.

After a classmate answers Mrs. Post’s question in a completely odd and illogical way, Firer explains, finally allowing herself a measure of poetical language:

I was changed also.  
I left Mrs. Post’s room bedraggled  
with words and their possibilities  
to create hallucinations  
quiet breathing  
to create bouquets of confusion  
& feasts of loss

The poems of “Hydromancy,” by contrast, resist explanation, employ much tighter diction, and focus on sound and words themselves, as in “Life in Waves,” which incorporates, as almost all the poems in this section do, the wave:

Ghoul-hearted, beautiful lawn of water,  
the compass of sound brought me.  
The orchard sky, the hinge of wave  
cocktail-silver hammered. Waves’  
slippage & delicacies & wave wattage  
reportage’s scrim opacity. Quonset  
meretricious waves’ winter ice arch,  
filled with feathers, bocce balls, & light.

Note the final –l’s in *ghoul*, *beautiful*, *cocktail*, *silver*, etc. the final –j sound of *slippage*, *wattage*, *reportage*, as well as the alliteration throughout: this is a quiet, rocking lullaby of a poem, as opposed to the list prose-poem “The Wave Docent” which catalogs a variety of wave types while also trying to suggest those types through sound and imagery: “lace waves; meadow waves; dazzle dump waves; ghost waves; waves of drowning waving right hands; velvet underground rip waves; waves breaking with black

pearls, murder, and God; Big Buddha waves; Matroyshka waves; waves' language, anthem; thresholds, society & ministry; come for the always horizon's standstill inventions (contraptions?) sawtoothed waves." Likewise "Wave Kabuki," also a list, focuses on some of the harsher aspects of waves:

Ruthless isomorphism  
resplendent displacement  
analgesics' headlong brilliant  
moveable katabatic pageant's  
alluvial gouache bethel!

Although one of Firer's most frequent subjects throughout the collection is death, especially those she often returns to of her mother, sister, and baby, it is meaning, as well as beauty, that she looks to recover in the poems, as in "Eating Pears" or "The Star Club Portal," about dressing her mother's body for burial in a new but ordinary blue-and-white print housedress. The poem begins conversationally, casually, then ends with this image of loveliness snatched from loss:

Like the magician  
who pull-snaps the tablecloth from underneath  
the set table without breaking  
a single dish, I pulled her hospital  
gown out from under death's  
star-scattered housedress.

Again and again, ordinary people are the authors of beauty in Firer's poems, as for example in "1956, The Year My Sister, Using Her Ill Health Once Again, Blackmailed My Parents Into An Accordion," or "Old Long Since," which describes a neighborhood New Year's Eve celebration:

A neighbor shoots  
a huge gold lamé spider fire-  
work up into the sky. Under it,  
under his own roof, under  
his covers, Steve is  
reading Neruda's "Enigmas."  
In our own yard, Jim  
takes up his moon-lit silver  
cornet and plays "Auld Lang Syne."

At the base of this belief in beauty, is a quiet but passionate belief in meaning and belief itself, as in an older poem "I, the Excommunicate":

I am driving the God car. I have put out  
my God traps. I am putting out feeder lines  
to God: prayer flags, prayers wheels, artichokes,

prayer beads, prayer birds, prayer songs, (do wha  
ditty ditty dum ditty yea), prayer words.  
Before my Holy Ghost bedtime, I this completely  
perishable excommunicate, am doing the big in-  
timate grocery shopping with God; look  
in our basket: State Fair corn dogs & tater tots.

Though not as central to the new poems as to the 1993 collection, *The Lives of Saints*, in which this poem appears, belief is still present in Firer's poetic sensibilities and imagery, as in for example, "The Island Of Wingnut Stars," where Catholic practices like the stations of the cross and communion are married to natural objects :

In the festival of sorrows, I  
do the stations of the trees,  
read the dictionary of lake blues,  
take the communion of stones

Firer's rich poetry—powerful and beautiful—creates a house whose rooms, by turns restful and invigorating, you will want to admire, borrow from, and revisit. She is a fiercely regional architect who ought to be known widely.