

CHERYL FROST

John Heuzenroeder. *From Mengler's Hill*. Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1979. Cloth \$4.50.

Whatever your way of coping – whether a television-induced haze, a philosophy full of comfort and illusion, or submission to the dulling alternation of work-sleep-weekend – these poems offer an escape to reality. They look at love and death straight. Their basic feeling, and they are primarily “feeling” poems, is anguish, held in check by the poet’s intelligent artistry, and his search through his experience for joy, assurance, and perhaps an answer. Here is part of what he has to say about love, from the second section, which gives its name to the volume:

Hills and islands, walls of earth –
but earth, at least, is innocent:
the ground that lovers tread
is different: dead men’s terrors
stiffened into law,
the whole mosaic hung high
against the nursery wall, to teach
that love’s a forest full of raging beasts.

The truth-telling is even stronger in the third section, “Down by Rose Bridge,” concerned with dying:

How vain, how vacuous is the Browning stand –
‘one fight more, the best and the last . . . let me
taste the whole of it . . .’ Because the harsh truth
about a dying man is simply this –
that he has no choice, and therefore nothing
to fight; and the only real questions are –
how long will it last? how bad will it get? –
and the shame of being reduced, giving up
all responsibility, changing to
an uncontrollable organic mess,
an obscenity, squirting bile and shit.
Rhetoric and postures are for the world
of the still living. Here there is only
morphia to defraud sincerity
of its true terror.

This is the most uncompromising poem in the collection. As you might expect, others are less concerned with peak experiences, though they contain insights which most of us fleetingly come to but tend not to keep:

*... into the city
where the truth lies ...*

— James Rado

At dawn, at dark,
the city is an enigma,
looking nowhere,
hunched like a grey rat
against the Bosphorus.

Only by day
the towers return
perpetuating
old demands, denials,
obsolete hopes.

I'd claim this much!

A moment's space
pinched off
from the frenzy,
unlumbered with its concerns,
its complex absurdity,
its excuses;

room to walk ten paces
in your sight,
time to spend a morning
at your leisure.

The second and third sections of the volume make their points most directly: the current which runs through life runs through them. The first section, "Henry," is a selective biography of Heuzenroeder's great-grandfather, Heinrich, an early settler in Adelaide. Its effect is therefore somewhat less immediate, but it contains some polished verse. The narrative is fairly complex: Heinrich's feelings and love affairs in Duderstadt, Göttingen and Bremen; his decision to emigrate, presented as a structural turning point:

Was this as far
as Germany
would carry him?;

his meetings on shipboard, and finally his hard work and marriage in the new country, to which he may never have been fully reconciled:

but did he think, forgotten
there in Rundle Street,
of going back himself? Or visualise
a re-arrival in the cobbled lanes
of Duderstadt, the darkened
memory of that upper room,
the shapes of childhood
spired against the sky?

The first section is about equal in length to the second and third sections combined, and there is a satisfying and probably not unconscious parallel between Heinrich's experiences and Heuzenroeder's: in both cases preoccupation with love gives way to analyses of dying. In Heinrich's death in old age, however, there is a sense of calculated order and rest, which is partly a function of distance:

Sleep makes patterns with time.
Death too. One man's life, a crystal
of his era and his piece of earth.
The intellect will even vary time
with space; and Islam dies
according to the lunar year,
for there's a calculation
where one must, to change
a Turkish year into a Christian,
multiply the Turkish year with 9702 . . .

Cramp again. We stretch the tendon. There.

A parallel is also suggested between Heinrich's voyage to Adelaide, and the move between Adelaide and Townsville which occurs in the midst of the love poems of the second section. The verse underlines the lack of homogeneity in the Australian landscape:

From Mengler's Hill
the fence posts, wedged
like Stambul gravestones
in the summer grass,

stage down the gentle slope
towards that net
of crooked streets where
childhood caught me mooning
on a squeaky dobbin.

You,
a continent away, opening
girl's eyes to the glare of the Pacific,
scrambling through the rocks and grass
behind the house on Castle Hill, or feeding
breadscraps to the wallabies hopping
wild at dusk into the yard — you grew,
albeit under God's Irish eyes,
free as speargrass in an open plain.

As to the answers to life which, I've suggested, *From Mengler's Hill* may present, the first is the experience of depth to be attained, according to Heuzenroeder, as the consummation of love:

It was midday, I remember,
and we met like modern lovers,
blind and sly; but in each other
touched a darkness where
like spinning leaves in a prodigious teacup,
birds with black unmoving wings
were slowly turning, wheeling,
whirling past the sun.

The second answer, harmony, is exemplified in the poem which rounds off the collection:

Down at Rose Bridge
cup your ear and listen
for the simple songs

and you can hear
the grass-blades sing
like children here

and fallen leaves
can lie like lovers
singing in the shade

and in this place the water
sings across the ford stones
falling healing here

weigh down the road
the ford stones sing for they are coming
coming now to cross the water

at this place the ford stones ring
the grass-blades sing
for they are passing over here

at Rose Bridge Crossing
cup your ear and listen
for the simplest song

and if you hear it
you will know
that all the songs are one.

Though *From Mengler's Hill* may not be great poetry, it manages to combine some often disparate virtues — grace, lyricism and depth of feeling, with intelligence. It repays reading, as an individual, highly evolved response to the burdens which confront us all.