

Review of *The Wind Blows, The Ice Breaks: Poems of Loss and Renewal*,

Edited by Ted Bowman & Elizabeth Bourque Johnson, Minneapolis, MN: Nodin Press, 2010

Reviewed by Geri G. Chavis

This anthology of poetic gems is aptly titled with images of wind and ice, depicting the fluidity and change inherent in life's forces. The poems collected here reflect both the dismal realities of loss and the sense that we can journey into grief's core to find our way out. As images of wind and ice suggest, life is hard, presenting us at times with almost unbearable trials, but life is also ultimately about cycles in which joy and pain take their turns.

Editors Ted and Elizabeth have done an excellent job in selecting poems that come straight from the heart. Both are eminently qualified by their career backgrounds and personal experiences to have undertaken this task, and the positive results of their labors permeate this book. The poems they have chosen to include do not tread tentatively around the surfaces of grief, and they do not offer simplistic resolutions. They are poems that ring true with an honest voice. Nikki Giovanni captures the active experience of poetry reading when she defines a poem as "pure energy" that is "horizontally contained/ between the mind/ of the poet and the ear of the reader" (*Poetry*, 2003, p.221). The works filling the pages of this anthology provide that intimate link. Readers of this book are bound to discover words to treasure here—words that embody their own pain, doubts, fears and hopes in the face of life's losses.

A book such as this serves as a welcome counterpoint to all those messages that tell us we ought to move on with our lives within a specified period of time, or that we need to grieve in a particular, acceptable way. The poems collected here provide a welcome breath of authenticity in a culture that tends to hide the harsh reality of death.

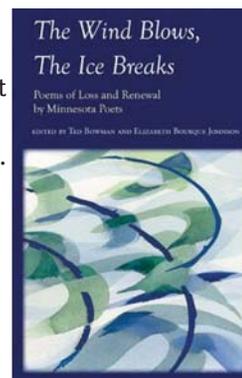
Instead of distorting or glossing over reality, the poems in this collection convey honest emotions through evocative imagery and aptly chosen word combinations. They capture the extraordinary quality of human experience in terms of ordinary details that are both poignant and easily recognizable to readers. For example, Heid Erdrich in *Phosphorescence*, tells us that "disaster/ sucks all the air from the room," and Carol Pearce Bjorlie refers in a hauntingly understated way to "the routine/ mammogram surprise" in her poem *Ambushed*. Marilyn Boe, in *A Strange Thing Happens* describes her spouse in ER after a stroke as the "pulsating center of a serious storm." In Pam Wynn's *Miscarriage*, a woman's profound grief is powerfully conveyed in a simple act that transcends language. Silently and slowly, this woman "places the white/ Crocheted blanket, the yellow/ Booties, the tiny knitted sweater/ In a clear plastic bag." In *Looking at Aging Faces*, Robert Bly's words are equally simple and effective when he describes some faces in this way: "you can see disappointment there, where parent-teacher/ Meetings have affected the chin; or the nose got pushed/ To one side by deaths." In *Remembering Loves and Deaths*, Thomas McGrath gets right to the core of those grueling grief hours when he indicates that the "roads" of loved ones "are still in the map of our flesh/ Easy to get to almost any time/ Around midnight."

As a literature teacher, psychologist and poetry therapist, I have always strongly advocated for poems that are accessible, that communicate their mood and content in ways that are not just original and striking but that are comprehensible. These, in my opinion,

are the poems that feed the soul and soothe the psyche. In Bowman's and Johnson's anthology, almost all the poems fall into this category, and even the few that remain elusive

contain images and words that invite reflection and evoke response. I also prefer poems that are concise or brief enough to engage and sustain reader interest. Ranging from half a page to two pages maximum, the poems in this anthology clearly reflect this preference.

The richness of this anthology also comes from its range and diversity—in the types of losses recounted, in the emotional, visceral and cognitive responses to these losses, in the comforts discovered and in the degree of acceptance manifested. Although many of these poems deal with the death of a beloved individual, some of them reflect the raw pain of recent loss while others are written from the perspective gained with the passing years. In some poems, the speakers confront the reality of their own death, aging process or sense of mortality. In other poems, the losses involve farewells to innocence when we are initiated into life's pain, or the void where safety and trust are missing when others abuse, betray or disappoint us. There are poems that deal with the loss of dreams such as the expectation that you would marry or have children. There are also a few poems that blend personal feelings with political or social commentary. These zero in on the loss we feel when our governmen-



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tal policies or societal realities seem to render us helpless and threaten to eclipse the light of hope. Some poems reflect 'ambiguous loss' to use Pauline Boss' term, such as a brother who has been missing for years or a parent whose mental faculties are diminishing. There is also diversity among the poets whose voices are heard. Though all are Minnesotans, they come from different ethnic backgrounds, and there is a well-chosen balance of male and female authors.

The diversity of this anthology also involves the many forms taken by hope or renewal. At times, poets voice an instant recognition of acceptance or a sudden awareness of life's cyclical nature. At other times, the optimism is much more subtle, yet just as powerful and real. This range is illustrated in the following two examples. In Marilyn Benson's *Good-Bye*, adult siblings with their families experience palpable comfort and some degree of closure as soon as they throw their father's "ashes into the strong south wind." On the other hand, the persona of Ethna McKiernan's *Grief* simply suggests resignation and a sense of a shared human destiny when she describes "grief" as "that thief, softened by time or abandoned with intent" and as "the one constant that outlasts them all." In several other poems, the wounds of loss are assuaged or healed through honoring positive memories and legacies.

This collection is also organized in a satisfying way. It contains a "Prelude" section with five poems that help set the tone of the book, conveying the universality of grief and how it is a necessary part of life we bear because we are human. The three sections in the book's center, entitled, "The wind whirls around us . . ."; "The ice cracks beneath us . . ." and "The ice breaks,

the wind blows" obviously follow the imagery of the book's title. The poems in these sections can be read in the order indicated or chosen randomly as the reader wishes. The final two sections, entitled "The sky begins to blue . . ." and ". . . and a bird sings" contain poems that are somewhat more philosophical than the previous ones, reflecting our human quest to understand the place of loss, happiness and time in our lives. The poems in these two parts also offer, in a more concentrated fashion than previous ones, the "renewal" side of the grieving cycle. Joyce Sutphen's poem, *Now That Anything Could Happen*, functions as a very appropriate opener for the book's final section. While acknowledging the pain and unpredictability of life's misfortunes, the rhetorical questions that Sutphen presents provide an ideal entree to the remaining works that celebrate the strength of the human voice and spirit in the face of adversity.

This collection is infused with the overt and subtle hope inherent in the natural world and our human connection to it. Permeating this anthology is the sense that nature and its beauty heals. The voice of the "Meadowlark" of Margaret Hasse's poem can be a "Mending Song," and when Mary Willette Hughes' speaker "encounter[s] the heart" of a breathtaking "tangerine rose," she can "begin to comprehend/ . . . the days of sweetness/the days of thorns."

Besides providing a therapeutic reading experience, many of the poems in *The Wind Blows*, *The Ice Breaks* are also likely to stimulate readers' own creative expression. As a poetry therapy practitioner and mentor/supervisor, I know the psychological benefit of discovering that you are not alone with your reactions to loss and also the power of interweaving the reading and writing processes. For all those working in the field of death

education and support, this anthology will be a valued possession. But it is also an important addition to the library of all mental health and medical professionals, to all who are grieving and to all who care about individuals in the throes of loss.

The concluding poem in this anthology by Wang Ping provides a fitting invitation to exercise our own voices. In bolded print, Ping tells us that "All stories are personal." She asserts that these stories "must be told" until "every name, face/ every shattered hope, calls/ from the womb of memory." Not only are we encouraged to offer our own truth in face of our own grieving, but we are also given the message here that creative expressions of our journeys through loss and renewal will continuously emerge. With ever new voices joining the mix, perhaps we will be blessed with a sequel to this very welcome anthology. Reading this book has been like eating a multi-course and lovingly prepared meal filled with nutrients and a potpourri of carefully blended flavors. With enthusiasm, I look forward to another such repast.

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Bourque Johnson, should allow for a little unplugging and healing of your own.

So finally, another issue goes to press. The connectedness of MCDES, especially after my own unraveling, feels important. There are many reasons for the need to detach, for quieting, for stepping back, for healing. But just as many reasons call for eventually coming back to the focus of belonging. So during this busy, start-up-again season of autumn, I wish you stolen moments of rest and a little unplugging of your own. Seneca, Powers and Peggy Noonan, too, would approve! Hope to see you all at the fall conference.