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***Never Enough Already*, Jane Blanchard. Kelsay Books, 2021.**

***Sooner or Later*, Jane Blanchard. Kelsay Books, 2022.**

Jane Blanchard's poetry is one of precise language, precisely executed forms (especially Shakespearean sonnets and villanelles), and precise wit. Blanchard's is not a machine-like precision, though, punching out the same pattern again and again. It is the precision of a great painter, who sees the need for one light brushstroke and then not one stroke more, or the precision of a great gymnast completing a complex routine with ease and flair. The latter comparison is especially apt since, as the concluding couplets in her sonnets show, Blanchard knows how to stick a landing.

Blanchard is also a prolific poet, publishing six volumes in seven years' time: *Unloosed* (2016), *Tides & Currents* (2017), *After Before* (2019), *In or Out of Season* (2020), *Never Enough Already* (2021), *Sooner or Later* (2022). Blanchard returned to poetry after a decades-long hiatus. Her muse was obviously ready to get back to work. Even the titles of her volumes suggest this. They evoke release, constant movement, inevitability, insatiability. But there is a reason I mentioned Blanchard's precision first. While she is incredibly productive, each poem is well-wrought, crisp. Not one feels rushed. And the collections themselves are intricately arranged, with themes, topics, and forms woven together, so that we might, for instance, get a somber handling of a topic juxtaposed with a sardonic one. The poem "Weaving" in *Sooner or Later*, about a medieval tapestry, provides an apt image for Blanchard's poetic practice in this regard. What are Blanchard's major concerns? Married life, friendship, exes, loss (including the inevitable heartbreak of parenting), food, faith, the folly of current events and social pretensions (especially at writing workshops). She splits her time between Augusta, Georgia, and the Georgia beach, and these two locales situate many of her poems.

Blanchard is a particularly skilled humorist. Some of my favorite poems in these collections skewer the pat wisdom of life and literature. Consider three examples from *Never Enough Already*. "Again" takes up the conventional poetic advice that you

should not settle on a form too quickly, that you should allow it to organically emerge:

As language flows from pen or key to page,
Discovery could be one's s.o.p.
So that surprise engages every stage
Of writing any kind of poetry.

The sonnet ends with this wry wink of a couplet: "A habit can be difficult to halt: / Here is another sonnet by default." "All Aboard" pokes fun at another bit of standard writerly advice:

No poet has to travel far
To find some inspiration,
But why should anyone forgo
A get-away vacation?

Here and elsewhere in the collection, Blanchard's verve, sly humor, and formal virtuosity call to mind the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. But T. S. Eliot is the early twentieth-century poet who gets the explicit nod in "The Long Song of Jane E. G. Blanchard," complete with an epigraph from Dante. Prufrock's ennui is hilariously transported to a summer writing workshop, with its hothouse mix of ego and insecurity, with its "sleepless stint in dormitory suite / Post evening boozy-schmoozy meet-and-greet" and its room where "the poets sit and pose / Waiting for which way the wind blows."

Blanchard does not only write about writing, though, and she is not only a poet's poet. You could hand a copy of *Never Enough Already* or *Sooner or Later* to someone with a stated aversion to poetry, and I suspect that Blanchard would have them guffawing in delight and turning from page to page. "Strategy," an advice poem in *Sooner or Later* about chance encounters with exes, ends with this kicker, funny and wise and bittersweet all at once: "Maintain some semblance of composure; / Abandon any hope of closure."

Blanchard might also cause our hypothetical reader to shed a tear, for she does not only write light verse, and her humorous poems are not necessarily light. Consider the heart-wrenching poem "Vigil" in *Never Enough Already*, where a dying mother is attended by a daughter who turns away from the medical machinery, from "tracking vitals on a monitor," to

gently “moisten her / poor mother’s mouth” with a sponge. She does so “in trust / that meager efforts matter.” The first half of the poem is built around poignant juxtapositions of the technical (as necessary as that may be) and the human, of the technician and the daughter. In the closing lines of the poem, though, the scene becomes an archetypal and timeless “vigil.” The daughter is joined by her husband and her own daughter at the bedside: “Breath by breath, / life must concede another loss to death.” The next two poems deal with a funeral and the aftermath of loss. Here the humor returns but as a way of dealing with grief and the purportedly consoling comments of others, too often callous, clichéd, or uncomfortable. “Condolences” runs through ten such comments offered during a lunch out and then ends: “Spare me from unwelcome roaches. / Look, another one approaches.”

There are also poems of understated observation. I was particularly moved by “At Church on Christmas Day” in *Sooner or Later*. Here the poet notes a single goldfish cracker, familiar to anyone who has had to snack a restless child through a long homily, parceling out one fish at a time. The cracker is untrammelled beneath the pew, remarkably so given the previous evening’s busy Christmas Eve service:

The fact that no foot crushed it in
The crowd the night before
Seemed yet another miracle,
As if we needed more.

This spare stanza somehow suggests a world, with the penultimate line evoking everything from the mundane realities of parenting and cleaning up crumbs to the child in the manger, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Last Supper, the Ichthus on the catacomb walls. Once more, Blanchard is a precise poet. Here it is the poetic paradox of how the precisely right line can awaken us to mystery.