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Serious Pleasure

Robert B. Shaw. *What Remains to Be Said: New and Selected Poems*. Pinyon Publishing, 2022. 312 pp.

Through some of the most turbulent decades in the history of English prosody, Robert B. Shaw has kept his bearings, never losing sight of meter, musicality, integrity of meaning, surprises of the imagination, feats of association, strategies of rhyme, and the accurate word, among other crucial poetic compass points. “I am indebted in a primal way to the English language,” Shaw says in an interview with Ryan Wilson for *Literary Matters* (Issue 14.3). He repays that debt in full, at the current rate of interest, with *What Remains to Be Said*, a superlative addition to this year’s plentiful field of “new and selected” titles.

Along with twenty-eight new poems, half of them in print for the first time, the volume contains, by my count, 215 selections from Shaw’s previous seven poetry books, dating back to *Comforting the Wilderness*, published in 1977, when Shaw was twenty-nine years old. In the Foreword to *What Remains to Be Said*, he tells us

The earliest poem reprinted in this book was written in 1966, when I was nineteen. Most of the new poems in the first section were written over a period of about a year bridging 2020 and 2021. I leave it to others to do the math.

According to my math, the poems here span fifty-five years.

“I think I was a very odd teenager,” Shaw relates in *Literary Matters*, and he continues

Very early on . . . I felt that what I was doing was different from a hobby or a pastime. I felt deeply compelled, not just to write, but to rewrite, to master expressive clarity and technical skills. It gave me, when it went well, a pleasure that was too serious to be called fun.

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The serious pleasure paid off. In 1978, the critic, Paul Breslin wrote in *Ploughshares*

. . . the first thing one notices in *Comforting the Wilderness* is Shaw's impressive command of traditional form. . . . On closer acquaintance, one finds that the best dozen poems or so have more than wit and skill; they have an understated but unmistakable intensity of feeling.

Surely, "A Study" is one of the "best dozen poems" Paul Breslin had in mind in his assessment of Shaw's first book. It's a remarkable poem for a poet to have written in his twenties, therefore, probably not the one Shaw wrote when he was nineteen. It describes the first stunned moments upon entering a room where someone has hanged himself. The room is, apparently, a study; and the poem, itself, is a study of the room. The emotional content is skillfully delegated to the unobtrusive end-rhymes, which serve to create a sense of inevitability and finality:

That was it: having made his effects as neat
as might befit a man of considered action,
he set himself to perform this final feat
of incredible abstraction.

"Twilight eddies in the corners, almost blue," Shaw writes of daylight's remnants, as "Hairline cracks begin to radiate / outward from the firm hook that held the chandelier." The poem finishes with a devastating play on words — Shaw excels at double meanings — as "we, his audience, who forced the door" behold in disbelief the "willing suspension."

The identity of the victim and how he is connected to the poet is left to the reader's imagination. Shaw was not yet the more personal poet he would become, but he learned early on to keep his lens clear, his focus sharp, and his hand steady when facing a subject as difficult as that of "A Study." When something is already heavy, why add more weight and send it crashing through the floor? To quote Shaw's interview in *Literary Matters*, "Gravity will get our worn out bodies in the end. But the imagination is still free to ascend as well as to plumb the depths."

I tried, but ultimately could not decide which of the early poems Shaw wrote when he was nineteen. However, if I were forced to choose, I might guess "The Pause" or "In Witness" for the moody woodland settings that suggest the significant im-

pression Robert Frost made on Shaw when he began to seriously study and write poetry in high school. Furthermore, “In Witness” is dedicated to Robert Fitzgerald, Shaw’s professor at Harvard, where, as an undergraduate, he also had the good fortune of studying with Robert Lowell. (As a side-note, it’s hard to ignore the importance in Shaw’s life of so many figures named Robert. In addition to Fitzgerald and Lowell, as well as the major influence of Robert Frost, Robert B. Shaw, himself, is named for his distant relative, the Bard of Scotland, Robert Burns.)

If emulation signals the work of a nineteen year-old, “Snake Crossing” might be a candidate, due to its strong echoes of Dickinson’s well-known encounter with her “narrow fellow in the Grass,” particularly in the phrases “horsewhip tailed,” “jumpiness of heart,” and “joints made gelid,” recalling Dickinson’s “Whip Lash,” “tighter breathing,” and “zero at the bone.” Shaw’s later poems, “To the Cricket” and “Shut In,” among others, assimilate Dickinson’s influence organically. In any case, all the poems Shaw selected from his first book must surely be among the “best dozen or so” Paul Breslin mentioned, and it seems a shame not to have included more than ten of them here.

In 1988, when Shaw published his second book, *The Wonder of Seeing Double*, he’d been serving as Emily Dickinson Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College for five years, a position he held until he retired in 2016. It’s no wonder that, after nearly two decades, having taught thousands of English majors, Shaw wrote “Letter of Recommendation” (*Solving for X*, 2002). In couplet rhymes worthy of Alexander Pope, Shaw makes the amusing and candid confession that the only piece of information he’s able to glean about a former student is the less than perfect letter grade he gave her.

Even though some of his former students at the college Emily Dickinson attended may have failed to leave a significant impression, Shaw is fully aware of the impression Dickinson has made on his work, as he acknowledges to Ryan Wilson,

You can look out the window on winter afternoons and see that certain slant of light ‘That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes.’ It can seem intimidating — a lot to live up to — but also inspiring if you can at moments sense such lingering presences.

In “Called Back,” also from *Solving for X*, Shaw describes a quietly moving instance of Dickinson’s lingering presence, using

her characteristic quatrains of common measure and end rhymes — several of them slant — at the second and fourth lines of trimeter, as well as her style of punctuating with dashes and quaint capitalizations. The poem recounts a tour of the Homestead, in which Shaw addresses Dickinson directly: “We came — a Century or so / Too late — to find you Home.” He ultimately leads us outdoors to Emily’s gravesite with the words “Called Back” carved in her tombstone, where he reflects

Gray Words hemmed by an Iron Fence —
Latticed — by mighty Trees —
Your Postscript to the World declares
How Potent Absence is.

A different presence, easy to imagine as a descendant of Dickinson’s fellow Amherst townsmen, recurs in three selections from Shaw’s first two books. She’s an elderly female relation, possibly a great aunt or grandmother, a memorable New Englander who fastidiously preserves family heirlooms and traditional practices. We meet her in “Boston Sunday Dinner” from *Comforting the Wilderness*:

More grandly than a camel kneeling down
in desert twilight she assumed her place,
motioning me to join her at her right.

I recognized my own grandmother’s Victorian touch when Shaw recalls, “A prism hung to the cord of a window blind” and how it “sprinkled a bracelet of rainbow on her wrist.” The same figure, or a similar one, returns in “Bright Enough to See Your Face In” and “Homework” from *The Wonder of Seeing Double*.

These are among the first of Shaw’s prolific outputs of blank verse, a form well suited to the conversational style he favors, and, to a large extent, inspired by his early encounter with Robert Frost’s blank verse narratives, as he describes to Ryan Wilson:

At first, because I hadn’t read much if any earlier blank verse, some of Frost’s speech effects made it hard for me to hear it as regular meter at all. I remember puzzling over it, and very gradually growing to hear the regular beat underlying even lines that veered conspicuously

away from it. This interested me deeply, and gave me a sense of meter as something measured but not mechanical. When I came to writing blank verse myself, I was attracted to the versatility of it: it could be lyric or narrative, descriptive or dramatic. . . . [L]ike Frost and so many others, I value the illusion of verse as conversational speech.

Not surprisingly, in 2007, Ohio University Press published Shaw's highly readable and instructive book, *Blank Verse. A Guide to Its History and Use*.

Probably Shaw's most notable blank verse poem remains "The Post Office Murals Restored," also the title of his third collection, published in 1994. Having volunteered to clean the wall paintings of the local post office, which aren't, as he tells us, "anything I'd choose to paint myself— / earnest, public-minded '30s stuff," Shaw reflects on the history of the town, as he slowly cleans the murals, clarifying their images, and guiding us through his thoughts. The poem is untypically several pages long, but typically conversational with thoughtful commentary and instances of subtle double meaning. About halfway through, Shaw brings us "face to face with the long wall, / full of lore to ponder on your way out:"

Where to begin? The left,
I guess, which goes back to pre-history,
that is, before the founding of the town.
It's of a forest clearing where a pair
of fur-traders socialize with Indians.
Some small thing (a rabbit?) roasts on a spit,
and the men share a pipe beside the fire. . . .

When Shaw asks, "Where to begin?" his answer, "The left," comes at the end of the line, where, despite the enjambment, the weight of its double meaning stands out. As he painstakingly washes away the grime of past ignorance, Shaw reflects on a more enlightened and more troubling view of American history:

Dabbing it clean by inches I was bothered
by weird sensations as if I could feel
the textures changing hands in these transactions.
The red men handed over something warm
and soft, and got in payment something cold

and hard. They couldn't possibly have known
what they were buying into, any more
than they or their pale guests could have divined
that this unbroken wilderness they sat in
would in a century and a bit be axed.
The trees were fair game once the game was gone.

The dark commentary that simmers in Shaw's thoughts, as he considers the catastrophes that will befall the "red men" and the forest, boils over in a scalding new poem, "After the Latest Mass Shooting." It begins, "The motto's changed: Live free *and* die." With a glaring italicized conjunction, Shaw adapts New Hampshire's state motto to better fit the current crisis of gun violence in the United States, and, in tightly contained couplets of iambic trimeter, he goes on to mock the government leaders whose cowardly, money-driven failure to act has perpetuated the crisis.

Shaw's poems rarely embrace such dark statements. In fact, he seldom even uses a nocturnal setting. More often, his moods are developed through explorations of daylight. A new poem about the moon is called "Daytime Moon." A poem called "Dusk," from *Aromatics* (2011), ends up being about dawn's radiance; and the gorgeous aubade, "A Certain Other Slant," also from *Aromatics*, bids us to "See the blinds partly askew, parsing the sun-flood / into a radiant sheaf of diagonals." "Winter Sunset," from 2016's *A Late Spring, and After*, ends with the line, "My goal is afterglow." Reflection, translucence, and changing light are devices Shaw uses frequently throughout his work.

"A Beacon," also from *A Late Spring, and After*, is a noteworthy exception. Shaw has said that his poems have become more personal with time, and this one, in which the distance and the obscurity feel insurmountable, deals with a poignant, solitary image of his father, seated on the terrace at night, smoking a cigarette, an "ember-dot of hot vermilion" in the "cooling, deepening dark." When his father inhales, it is

as if his cigarette end took a cue from
fireflies glimmering in and above the grass,
but unlike them, finding no answering flash.

Adam Kirsch's comment about John Donne's use of metaphor (*The New Yorker* October 10, 2022) is equally true of

Shaw's: "The metaphors aren't merely virtuosic; in elaborating them, he discovers surprising new aspects of his subject."

By contrast to the one in "A Beacon," a cigarette can be hilarious, as in "Making Do," from *Solving for X*, in which Shaw describes a series of outraged experts, from piano tuner to electrician, who take offense at the do-it-yourself repairs perpetrated by amateurs who are simply "making do" with what they have. In one case

. . . the house painter
almost swallowed his cigarette when he saw
the alligatoring my hapless hand-done
sanding had left sitting on the clapboards.

Much of Shaw's humor occurs when seemingly trivial subjects end up having serious or deeply personal meaning. "In the Kitchen," one of the opening section's new poems, is about the universal experience of accidentally dropping a glass on the floor and helplessly watching it shatter "from shards, to splinters, to smithereens."

. . . maybe now it will have startled
out of you some respect as an exemplum —
of what? That you should be more careful?
As a lifelong belt-and-suspenders person
you don't find that enlightening. No, it's more
of a reminder of how close behind the scrim
of your placid day-to-day sense of safety
chaos waits to occasionally poke through.
Yes. That is what this brokenness says to you.

Shaw has an uncanny ability to bring a moment almost to a standstill, making it possible to study an occurrence in freeze-frame slow motion while it's happening. As Shaw puts it, his aim as a poet is "to capture the moment and give it safe harbor on the page, rescued from the flow of time. Some people do this with cameras, others by keeping diaries. I do it in verse, which to me seems to have more staying power."

With "Ant in Amber," again from *Solving for X*, Shaw gives us, in rhyming couplets, an image of the captured moment itself. Humor and double meaning don't escape him in such lines as, "Nature expended quite some enterprise / in getting

this poor sap to fossilize.” As was his namesake, Robert Burns, Shaw is a deeply empathetic individual, by nature and towards nature. His petrified ant resembles Burns’ “Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim’rous beastie,” and the frequently quoted lines about “the best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men” resonate in Shaw’s amber bead prisoner:

Now honey-hued, translucent, it displays
intact the forager of former days:
every last leg the little soldier needed
is here embalmed, or we might say embedded.

A moment of classical beauty follows, when Shaw muses, “Didn’t the Greeks believe such beads were spawned / as tears of sunset, hardened as next day dawned?” Finally, as Robert Frost (and Horace) recommend, the poem that began in delight finds its way to wisdom in the end: “a model instance, maybe of renewal — / interred as ant and disinterred as jewel.”

The mingling of pathos and humor comes naturally to Shaw. In a May, 2019 interview with Sarah London for *The Women Tale Press*, he comments on the necessity of humor in poetry:

I certainly think that humor can be a useful ingredient in a poem whose subject matter may not in itself be funny at all. The old-fashioned term “comic relief” comes to mind. But it’s not as simple as seeing comic and tragic as sheer opposites and attempting to balance them against each other. To me what is often unsettling about human experience is the extent to which these things seem uncannily intermingled. Sometimes what we might call humor is hard to distinguish from irony. Maintaining some awareness of this is one way to keep writing from sliding into sentimentality. If we feel the joke is on us, that may not be fun, but it may be a step forward in adjusting ourselves to reality. As John Gay wrote: “Life is a jest; and all things show it. / I thought so once; but now I know it.”

Robert Frost, who had more than his share of personal tragedy, coined his own version of John Gay’s observation in the epigram

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee,
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

The final section of *What Remains to Be Said*, with poems from *A Late Spring*, and *After*, deals with some of the most recent “great big jokes” in Shaw’s life. The blank verse sonnet, “On the Death of Wilmer Mills,” eloquently expresses the shocked grief shared by all who knew the young poet, whose death will forever be an “imponderable event.”

The title poem, “A Late Spring,” is named for the season in which Shaw’s beloved wife, Hilary, died, after a sudden and brief struggle with multiple myeloma. The poem, a tightly contained villanelle in iambic trimeter, is a brave example of Emily Dickinson’s observation, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—/ The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs.” From its opening stanza, “A Late Spring” retains its formal composure, while establishing the villanelle’s stoic lines of mournful repetition:

She died on Mother’s Day.
Our son stood close to me.
What more is there to say?

The care with which Shaw has arranged the order of his poems is worth noting. *What Remains to Be Said* opens with the new poem, “Morning Song,” while the last section brings the book to a graceful close with “Winter Sunset.” Shaw has magically managed to give us five and a half decades in one full and enriching day. Still, he leaves us wishing the day were longer, and that, instead of “new and selected,” the title of *What Remains to Be Said* could have been “new and collected.”