

Poetry of Ben Volman - Page One



Introduction

Shalom! This collection includes selections of my older poetry some of which has appeared in publications including The University of Toronto Review. Quite simply, I see poetry as a moment caught by the poet's will, an act of crafting our experience with an intimacy that alters the reader's perceptions, opens up their mind and heart, and becomes significant for their personal journey. If the work succeeds, it is always an act of grace. An encounter with a reality that pushes the boundaries of our humanity until they are within sight of God. And if the moment permits, an open door for spiritual communion. My friend, you are welcome.

In Messiah,

Ben Volman

Metal Seed

Ben Volman

I

This is what I know:

My people were exiles in Spain,
goldsmiths who ground the fruit

of the Conquest, took gold worked faces
of gods to hammer into ornaments, thread.

The Inquisition scattered them, Jews
like oranges spilled across a table
over the roads of Europe, wanting
only a bit of land, forced
back on our trade we always drank
from the planet's cold vein.

In the forties my father tried his hand
at farming--home, in the Holy Land:
bullet strewn, thirsting for roots
a country between sunset and stars.

He failed, and safely in exile taught his sons
to straighten a tongue of sheet metal
'til the wet grains of rust
moved the blood in an opposite direction

II

In the half-light others turn to prophesy,

coming through the walls of cities
like a growth
bent towards Jerusalem
where the vein has come to the surface.

This is what I reason:
All of us are running
from the same God.

III

My mother tells me to understand failure,
this is how she found him
laughing in their last crop of sugar melon:
a baby between his legs
squatting in the peels and
sharing fingers of sweet gold with the goat
and the horse

The Old City

Ben Volman

"wise as a pomegranate"

Jewish saying

Brothers, we go down
to the market,
to the heaping baskets
of peppers and tomatoes,

hungry winter in the blood,
and we walk through falling snow,
sweet as scattering powder sugar
and eat raw, white
almonds from the open bushel
and go down the shattered streets
for gold slices of cheese,
square blocks of halvah.

On a corner a boy with a ruby ring
pulls a rooster
out of its wood cage.

Where is the old bakery?

I'm sorry to hear about your mother.

No, he's a teacher now.

We carry packages,
eggs wrapped in old news,
tied with a string.

We see reflections,
two brothers
walk past a storefront window,
inside the grocer weighs for a child
dark, red pomegranates
on a scale.

Carpenter

Ben Volman

Carpenter, what will you build today?

Carpenter, what will you hone,
chisel, shape, repair
or break?

Carpenter, what will you make
of this raw knotted timber?

are you still there?

Hammering so gently, planing,
piecing together
splinters,

quietly, just as they raised
the Temple.

You build
so peaceably
Carpenter.

So, I will drop these tools
to defend this ruined house
from change.

Carpenter, why is it
that your beautiful hands
know such rough, scarred wood
so well?

The Name

Ben Volman

You say you have problems with this name,
you don't understand, it was given,
every creation stands to one side,
words are only the symbol of separation.

A man does not own his own message.

You thought you picked me as a friend,

I should be another word: Caution.

Everyone is a famine, a rumor,

who deserts, appears.

Relax your nerves of grammar.

When a man knows he is a creation

he is never alone, even with the words

in his head

(the earth is the root,

or do you think the green stem takes life

from a pale, white tendril?)

after all, can a creation

create?

Turning point

Ben Volman

It's not the sky
that is dark at night:
the clouds, hurled in tides
against the moon
never cease to breathe gold.
it is the trees and cooling hills
that parch the candle in the eye.
Cold seeps out of the ground
and we stumble into the dark.

May you find blessings
despite my simple minded worries.
I pray you need never walk alone
from your house, among the fixed
and falling stars.

Line drawings, death image insert

Ben Volman

Giora, you are too strong to fit in a few lines of poetry,
longer in the bones than all your cousins,
straight fingers black
from a stick of charcoal.

I have a notebook--you force the eye
through a line
while a hair-trigger nerve reacts
for an eyebrow, exact
with an eraser.

Giora, the watchmaker's son with straight black hair
perhaps recalls a missing sketch-pad,
the imperfect circle of closing fingers,
drawn free hand when he reaches
for the handle
of a hair-brush
to dust a fine screw
wound into the tube
of an Uzi gun.

If God lived on earth

Ben Volman

"If God lived on earth
people would break his windows." old Jewish saying

Believers

don't make very good poets:
oh, we're pleasant enough
as company--
nothing too jarring on the soul
--the dishes are washed
and the lines get written--
iambic pentameter settles the heart,
nothing skips a beat,

but our masters,
the hawks, faith or no faith,
winging out of our mud-hen sight
with blood on their wings
cursing
fouling up the lingo,

dusting up eternity
with a free hand incision
on the cosmos

God made them
throw bricks
to force the rest of us
awake:

plough up suburbia
at 4 AM

STOP!

stop taking your damned comfort so seriously--scream
the world is uneasy--SCREAM--for every silence
ballooning into the night-speak-
--in God's name--speak--
for every wound
forbidden to bleed
into words

If the dead returned

Ben Volman

The dream comes
soaking you in sweat,
a dirigible of fear,
black with anger,
floating out of the past,

disgorging bodies
of grandparents and uncles,
children groping
for stolen eye-glasses,
women graceful and doe-like
in their nudity,
overweight naked men
who resemble tinted photographs
and you gasp for air
as they quietly dress.

The children gather
to play in a corner
and you would join them,
but you are not a child.

There is café-au-lait,
tea with lots of sugar,
and the sun goes down
so we close the windows
and collect the dishes.

Their skin is firm,
there is no smell of death.
I look into familiar eyes.
They forgive us for living.

My father, Israel

Ben Volman

My father, Israel, wrestles with ghosts
who disappear at dawn.

Each night my father shatters heaven
to grapple with the Holy One
(Blessed be He)

but the bony limbs and white eyes overcome

his wrestler arms
and herdsman legs.

Let them come, so we may hold them.
Let them come, so we can drink their tears.

I take my father's place
watching through the night
as they descend and ascend.

And may beloved Abba, Israel,
sleep
for the daily work of wrestling
with me.

Letter

Ben Volman

dear friend,
along the broken way,
we have held one another
through the dry stretches,

loved the calm voice
of prayer that speaks
unfailing peace--
and now, after years
you say: "It's come.
The healing."

While you have gone
and I walk a different path
I receive your comfort.
Your healing, my friend,
is healing me.