

Mortal Negotiations

By Walter Bergen

Book Review:

there is no finished world, by Stephen Corey. White Pine Press, 2003.

One would think that a book titled *there is no finished world*, which iterates this idea by not capitalizing any part of the title, since there will always be editing left to do, would not be focused on the subject of death. Is there any quicker way than death to finish off the world of experience? Even in attempting to avoid death in the opening poem, "Forgetting Mortality," the reader meets with the conundrum that in living one is bound to dying. In this book, Stephen Corey is most concerned with a personal, intimate death—oneself, mother, father—and not the anonymous slaughter of the 20th century, though there are hints of that, too. He is searching for that stance that will allow him to negotiate, not escape, mortality.

Though he runs the risk in many of these poems of lapsing into elegiac sentimentality, he almost always knows when to pull back, when to stop. He realizes that we have no choice. "It's our job," whether we flip burgers or turn Ferraris, to do the best we can and not be distracted by "sort of thinking of my death today . . . nor half-assed notions that your ass will soon be grass" ("Forgetting Mortality").

He never resorts to cliché. He wants us to march off into our living, "pounding . . . the beat with stick and gun—/ a living" ("Forgetting Mortality"). Life, "It's what we find, and make of it, and live with" ("Employment"); this is our defense, if you can call it that, even as Corey writes with humor and joy and transcendence. By the time I am finished reading the fourth section, *Mortal Fathers and Daughters* (the book is divided into five sections), I want to pick up the phone, call him, and ask if he's OK—if he still has a few more years, good or bad.

With the section titled *Poems of This Size*, the reader should be prepared for the good-things-come-in-small-packages syndrome. Corey taunts the reader, bragging, "Look what I can do." However, in these short poems, averaging 12 lines, his braggadocio is justified. He shows us that a short poem can have all the ambition, weight and impact of a longer one. These poems are not just good, they are gut-wrenchingly good. He has crafted a thematic architecture that builds with each poem: "In poems of this size, so little / might happen, one wonders if such brevity / can matter . . ." ("Poems of This Size").

What follows in the next nine lines is the story of Corey and his future wife, a nurse and not a doctor, strolling along a suburban street, when she sees a car strike a small boy. She is the only one trained to cradle the dying, and she realizes, in this once-serene streetscape, "at how quick and full an end can be." It's hard to imagine more happening in such a short poem, but in the next poem, six lines in length, Corey whips and dazzles the reader with these images: "I want the mind of Emerson / at the moment of his first masturbation, Dickinson faced with the bloody cloth" ("Carpe Diem"). Rather than genius grabbing the world by the throat, the world grabs genius and shakes it awake to its needs, desires, and frailties.

Corey is not shy; he doesn't turn away from difficult subjects. In "The Boy Scout's Motto Explodes," he is left to baby-sit with, "no name for my daughter's breast milk / bottled in my dry hand, this nourishment expressed / for my grandson's delight and survival." Corey braids together some of our deepest sexual conflicts and taboos, all in 13 lines. Maybe the short poem is inherently powerful because of its concentrated focus. We readers don't have time to wander, or maybe wonder, as we are directed down one street and not many; but in Corey's adept hands, one street turns into many; one subject becomes the unfinished world.

The first four sections of this book adroitly spin their webs of events and meanings. The poems in the last section are excellent, though less tightly structured than the previous poems—a small distraction within a powerful book. In "Editing Poems During a

Hospital Deathwatch," Corey leaves the living and dying working together in an unfinished world: "This place, right here, is where / we always meet: Beatrice with her chart / devoid of final blessings, you and I / searching for the words that nail sensation to the sky."

New Letters
on the Air

A weekly half-hour radio show featuring interviews and readings with poets and writers of fiction and creative nonfiction. Request it on your local public radio station.

Billy Collins
 Naomi Shihab Nye
 Richard Russo

Janet Burroway
 August Wilson
 Marilyn Nelson

Richard Ford
 Marilyn Hacker

Ishmael Reed
 Maxine Kumin

For more information, or for a free catalogue, please contact:

New Letters on the Air
 University of Missouri-KC
 5101 Rockhill Road
 Kansas City, MO 64110
 816.235.1159
 888.548.2477
www.newletters.org

