

Last Among Winners

By Katie Manning

Book Review:

Tulips, Water, Ash, by Lisa Gluskin Stonestreet,
Northeastern University Press, 2009.



In 2009, many of us watched (or heard more than we ever wanted to hear about) the series finale of *ER*, but another series ended more quietly that year. The Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize had been awarded annually by the department of English at Northeastern University in Boston for 26 years. The prize included publication of a first or second book of poetry, with poets such as Carl Phillips, Lucia Perillo, Michelle Boisseau, and J. Allyn Rosser among its winners. Although the prize has been discontinued for financial reasons, the last winning book, Lisa Gluskin Stonestreet's *Tulips, Water, Ash*, is a well-crafted, satisfying conclusion to the series.

The opening poem of the collection, “De Profundis,” invokes the penitential Psalm 130, but just as quickly spins away from confession into playfulness: “*out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord // — more like out of the middle, the soft / chewy center of here: the mailbox, the toaster, the dentist office.*” Stonestreet sustains this mock-serious tone as she continues, “*I cry // to you, or to nothing, I whisper / and roll my eyes: Oh, lord. / O Lord. Forgive us // our dailiness, our lists of lists.*” These lines serve as a kind of sneak preview for the rest of the poems, which are composed of layered lists, shifts in consciousness, and unexpected humor. This poem almost seems to ask forgiveness for the poems to come.

Stonestreet’s facility with lists is especially apparent in the poem “Jars.” She begins with mason jars “filling up with light and oddments, lids off / for everything rolling around in there: / car and computer crashes (minor), your twisted ankle, / a marriage (ours), trail of ants swirling // down in the cat dish, basil and dandelions /

leaping up in the yard." After this description of the jars' impossible contents, the poem gives us a glimpse of everyday life: a phone ringing, a bruise, bills, taking out trash. The poem concludes with another enigmatic list: "Back in bed, shivering, // then the morning, held down and arching / toward you. Three jars on the dresser: / tulips, water, ash." The listing here solicits questions and multiple readings. Is it humorous, comforting, or damaging that "a marriage (ours)" is in a jar? Is the final image sensual with the bed, arching, and flowers, or do the shivering and the ashes make this a scene of loss and grief? This collection's lists are more complex and provoking than we might expect, given what she calls the "dailiness" of their individual pieces.

Part of what makes these poems effective is the way Stonestreet uses her lists of images to mirror the movements of consciousness. In "Super Baby Jumbo Prawn," a poem that begins by placing an order at a neighborhood *taqueria*, a list of taco ingredients slips into a description of the surroundings, "the abandoned factory with its grid // of mottled glass, in one corner / the inevitable birdsnest or bullethole." Then the poem slips further on, moving into childhood memory: "Or the temptations of hopscotch— // *step on a crack, break your mother's back.*" The poem moves through the speaker's observations and thoughts, from appetizing ingredient descriptions to images that evoke abandonment and violence. The other part of what makes these poems effective is their language play and humor, from a poem about "Married Sex" to a poem called "Certain, Impossible, Likely" that mimics word problems from a fifth-grade math textbook. Stonestreet mixes the playful and the profound here, and the result well represents its place in a venerable series.