

The Enlightened Recumbent

By Thomas March

Book Reviews:

The Evening Light, by Floyd Skloot. Story Line Press, 2001.

The News and Other Poems, by David Citino. University of Notre Dame Press, 2002.

Virginia Woolf, in her essay “On Being Ill” writes, “It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, Nature is at no pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer.” The ill, she goes on to say, gain release from the social “make-believe” of “sympathy” that makes for so much work among the well. In *The Evening Light* and *The News and Other Poems*, Floyd Skloot and David Citino, respectively, write thoughtfully about death and what it is like to be ill. They also bring to well moments a sensitivity that shares the frankness and joyful release bred by the view from the sickbed.

In *The News and Other Poems*, Citino, who died in October 2005, teases many of his poems from the lesser headlines of a day’s news to reveal, in stories that might otherwise seem trivial, how people struggle against the defining conditions of their lives. “Unknown Soldier Buried at Gettysburg” begins with a paradoxical line describing this Civil War soldier as “[t]he luckiest of all the dead,” and, in spite of the mystery of his identity—it isn’t clear whether he fought for the Union or the Confederacy—the uncomfortable gratitude for his quick death summons to mind the agony that wounded soldiers experienced. The speaker of “The Death of a Friend Who Still Believes” has just received a phone call bringing news of a friend’s death. He reacts to this news with the observation of a paradox, that “just like that a life closes / with the customary *Hello*.” Instead of gratitude, here, there is shock at the banal form that news of loss can take. In “Spiders, Worms, the History of MS,” the speaker looks at the results of his MRI scan,

recalling research on inherited knowledge among spiders and worms, and observes:

We are what we leave behind,
the hungers we inspire.

Some poets have no trouble using cryptic aphorisms as shortcuts around the more demanding work of generating understanding. The truth of Citino's work emerges because he gives his readers access to the experiences that produce such insights.

The worshipful ending of "Song of the Bone," a sonnet to the speaker's mother, becomes a more general proclamation of his respect for life and gratitude for a parent's love: "[H]er gift was all of time, and nine months more." Although the poem has focused on the praiseworthy attributes of one mother, the last line's reference to the fact of a pregnancy's duration makes it possible to appreciate the life-giving labors of all mothers, including those absent or unknown.

Floyd Skloot writes more often with the penetration of Woolf's enlightened recumbent and also finds meaning, if not comfort, in the power of nature. The speaker of "A Change of Weather" compares the violent power of the natural world to the "rage" and "pain" of illness, but finally realizes that it is this kind of violent power he wishes for in a cure, "a swirling tempest in the blood / like a cyclone sweeping everything clean." In "Critical Care," Skloot presents images of the colorful ripeness of autumn to illustrate the cruel difference between natural beauty and natural processes. None of fall's beauty, he writes,

prepares us
to come inside
and see you lying there
in a wash of brilliant light
breathing
only when an eggshell blue
bellows drives the air into you.

The bellows sustains a life as fragile as the one an egg contains. In “Frogs Returning Moon,” Skloot writes:

It is not enough to sit in bed, rapt
but apart; after a six-month relapse
I am ready for a long walk outside.

The enjambment of these lines gives the statements the hesitant quality of a convalescent’s first halting steps back to wellness.

Neither Skloot nor Citino, however, wishes illness or death to dominate his work. Skloot begins *The Evening Light* with a series of poems about the private lives of artists—among them Manet, Moet, Seurat and Van Gogh. Each poem demystifies the process of creation—without diminishing its magnificence—by asserting its place within the routine of a private life. In their best poems, Skloot and Citino offer glimpses at the life-sustaining power that resides in creatures that are, in the end, powerless. These poets ask us to recognize the worthiness of plodding on, in whatever ways we can, for however much time we might have.