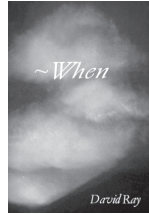


Through the Portal and Back

By Robert Stewart

Book Review:

When, by David Ray.
Howling Dog Press, 2007.



This magazine's policy does not allow us to run reviews of books by current or past staff members. I now will put a brick through the closed window of that policy. Such an act of anarchy, you would assume, must require strong motivation; you'd be correct. The motivation lies in an extraordinary book of poems, *When*, by former *New Letters* editor (1971-1985) David Ray. Don't think we dismantle magazine policy hot-headedly, either; *When* stands as David Ray's 20th volume, by my count, many of which came out after he left the magazine.

As with other books by David Ray, *When* contains topics readers will consider political; yet the poems are not so much about politics as about waking us up, reminiscent of Neruda's "Walking Around," full of contradictions and sulphur-colored birds, plus towels, shirts, and, in David Ray's case, mountain trails, roses, friends, children, and even the atomic bomb, out there somewhere. The poems provide plenty of neat literary and linguistic turns that take us from topics on a grand scale to a distinctive and intimate human voice.

"The Passenger Liner" in the opening poem turns out to be not a ship at sea but a jetliner, where the speaker looks through what he chooses to call a "porthole"—a subtly anachronistic word choice that evolves into a discourse on the kind of history people aboard the plane seem to admire most: They gaze down admiringly toward Los Alamos, forgetting that somewhere below lies the former home of D.H. Lawrence, as well. The dynamic from faith in art to faith in bombs, and back again, between creation and destruction, reflects a thematic structure David Ray returns to often in these poems.

Beyond the *porthole* in poem one, we pass into the town of Portal in another poem, "Departures," and the coincident "yahrzeit"—anniversary of a death—for both the poet's son, Samuel, and Apache Chief Geronimo; yet the speaker demands, "nothing is coincidence," and this, again, becomes the struggle between faith and loss, where the father of the deceased son fights, as did the old chief, against the particular reality neither could deny.

David Ray's body of work—global in nature, celebratory at its heart—reads at times like a series of life lessons on the construct of reality, which comes in complicated and varied layers. Poems glean the physical world, from the Oklahoma landscape to the lovechild of Elvis; and also the spiritual world of Zen poets, Buddha, the Quakers; and also the literary world of Sexton, Stafford, Graves, Jeffers, Isabel Allende, Hopkins, and Shinkichi Takahashi.

If, indeed, *nothing is coincidence*, we must move further to another poem, "Portal," which extends the word play to a metaphoric meditation on connection to everyone and everything that has gone before. "It's best to throw away the names and greet the dead as one," the speaker advises; but this book betrays the poet's irrepressible impulse to shape his poems from the very names and details of those who have passed, pushing us readers further through a portal, reminiscent of Alice's rabbit hole, where choice becomes one of passion over solace—love for everything, even in grief. In David Ray's poems, solace often comes, as Lewis Carroll's Alice said, "with gently smiling jaws."

The tone of reminiscence develops in complexity with "What They Are Watching," which uses the technique of syntactical repetition to examine a famous 1945 photo of folks gathered in New Mexico to watch an atomic blast. "That they should sit on long rows of benches," it begins. "That they should consider the desert / as a worthy place for the beholding." The repetitive drive of the poem joined with its shifting imagery keep us readers in suspension, allowing us to examine, over and over, our own reactions to that photograph and the mysteries of human behavior.

Take a look, poets and readers, at this gathering of poems, which moves as without effort from love for a wife—"You complain that life is too easy"—to a larger, implied conscience—"We / can indulge ourselves with more / than we need"—and further to a core, human empathy.

Amazingly, the poems here hold the reader in both a larger sense of the world and also in a rare intimacy with the speaker. Near the center of the book, the poem "Some Live with Sorrow" remembers the poet's son, Samuel, who died as a young man, and a friend's son, Brennan, then in a wheelchair. Poems don't get much more heartbreaking than this—but not over the boy, who "drove / his chair like a dodgem car with a joystick," and not for the speaker, who, in a moment of painful honesty admits, "Only my pity polluted the scene"—but for the spiritual battle, itself, which rages in a Blakian way between innocence and experience, celebration and regret.

The portal never closes, which is the hope and, in some way, the point of great poetry, and which is why I resist calling the final poem in the book, "When," a coda. David Ray returns here to his use of syntactical repetition, in a chant-like gathering of poets, pets, and relatives, as "When Whalen slept on our couch, / When Bly slept on my floor." With many good works of art, there is no structural conclusion implied; the poem looks back with some joy, especially for the reader, who can peek at the real Allen Ginsberg riding with the Rays to St. Louis, or the rag doll named for William Carlos Williams ("Dr. Williams"). Despite losses, the life of the family and of the world mingle and continue.

From that poem, I took my cue to attempt this review. *New Letters* continues to be the family home of a community of writers, thinkers, readers, and lovers of the world, which is why I crawled through that broken window of our review policy to direct a flashlight's narrow beam at this treasure of a book. So be it. We likely will nail a sheet of plywood over the shattered window, for now, but keep a crowbar handy.