What We Miss
by Glen Sorestad

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

In June, 2010, Glen Sorestad was awarded the Order of Canada for a lifetime of achievement in poetry. Sorestad was co-founder of Thistledown Press and the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, in addition to publishing over a dozen poetry collections. He is so integral to the Saskatchewan writers’ scene that it’s difficult to remember he started life in Vancouver. He has read his poetry throughout the world and has received many honours.

Sorestad is an acquisitor. In a “12 or 20 questions” interview with rob mclennan dated February 25, 2008, in responding to a question about his influences, Sorestad answered: “... music and art have always informed my work, quite regularly and at various stages of my writing life. However, the natural world has been a constant in my writing life from my first book to my most recent. If there is one dominant shaping influence for my life’s work, then the natural world would be it. I may have written more bird poems than Don McKay or Allan Safarik.”

What We Miss opens with a couple of those bird poems. The second one, “After Five Days of Wind,” begins with the red-winged blackbird emerging from spring. These lines are from the second and final stanza:

beneath an azure dazzle where,
red epaulets aglint it bursts
its fierce, flutey melody,
as happy now to be freed from
frigid north winds as we. (11)

There are several things to consider in this brief excerpt, the first being Sorestad’s attention to sound. His use of alliteration is magnificent. The phrase “azure dazzle,” which might have been sounded corny, founded as it is on the cliché expression “razzle dazzle,” describes perfectly the appearance of sky through trembling aspen leaves. How often do you see alliteration on the letter “z”? Consider as well the use of “f,” the line break severing “freed from” and “frigid” – a recognition that it would have been too much to have all three on the same line, whereas the line break provides just enough of a, well, break to set things right. But why the use of the antique, worn-out poetic word “aglint”; why the use of such convoluted syntax? This line cannot be salvaged – too many questions, not enough answers. It’s as if Sorestad was so intent on working the alliteration that he forgot to examine and edit the line.

Birds serve as a backdrop for the elaborate metaphor of “Morning Declaration.” Sorestad doesn’t waste time – nor should he in such a short poem – in establishing that metaphor, doing so in the first stanza:

This morning the northwest wind blusters
a declarative sentence, replete with clausal
gusts, punctuated with rainy exclamations. (18)
He uses this metaphor to set up an elaborate joke reminiscent of mad dogs and Englishmen, sans the dogs, with the poem concluding as follows:

My partner and I persist in our fitness
imperative, lean, two slashes in rain,
follow our syntactical route home. (18)

Undoubtedly, the structure of this poem owes much to John Donne and the metaphysical poets in the revival of the conceit, something we should see more of, although current taste seems to rebel often against even the slightest whiff of metaphor, relying instead upon the more subtle device of using syntax rather than words to imply something other.

Another bird poem, “November Heron,” enables Sorestad to create another poetic joke, this time using the just-mentioned subtlety of syntax in order to do so. The poem concerns a great blue heron that finds itself out of place in a prairie autumn quickly moving towards winter. It should have flown south by that time and is in imminent danger of death from exposure. Humans do not intrude onto this scene until the final stanza, where they do so almost as an afterthought:

Its kin, long flown to warmer waters,
are receding memories of what once was.
Silent snow falls on the heron, falls on us. (25)

Notice the control of words, of sound, the subtlety of the consonants. The “r” sound dominates this stanza but seldom in starting position. Perhaps this sound, contrasted as it is with the “w” sounds in the first and second lines, along with the “s”s of the third line that create the beauty of this stanza – and this poem. But the parallel construction with which the poem ends also creates the artistry, the sense of control this poem exudes.

As much as I admire Sorestad’s control of sound, it doesn’t quite work in the first part of the long, exceptionally well-constructed sentence that concludes the first stanza of “Late November”: “Cold wind nips the nape of my neck / but when I arc my way past . . .” (29). To my ear, the alliteration on the “n” sound is overdone, as it repeats itself another fourteen times within that sentence.

Sorestad is a master poet. Of this, there is no doubt. His poetry considers the quotidian. He has no time for philosophizing. To him, life is meant to be lived, something he has certainly done during his seventy-plus years. This book is an indication that he has found an answer that satisfies both him and us. ✰


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