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Churning Hymns Into Fragments

**The Lion Bridge: Selected
Poems, 1972-1995**

by Michael Palmer

Andrew Epstein



Michael Palmer

The Lion Bridge offers more than 250 pages of Michael Palmer's rigorous, difficult, and often beautiful poems, culled from a quarter century's worth of writing. One of the better-known figures associated with that group of radically experimental writers, the "language" poets, Palmer has also been lauded in more mainstream circles. This excellent selection is a significant gathering because it brings together, for the first time, a substantial selection of Palmer's challenging, distinctive oeuvre (much of which is out of print), chosen by the poet himself.

Palmer deliberately follows in the tradition of linguistic self-consciousness and experiment that includes such poets as Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Stein, Stevens, Zukofsky, Olson, Duncan, and Ashbery. Given this lineage, it's not surprising that Palmer's poems are never accessible, linear narratives spoken by a recognizable, coherent "I," in which vivid, beautiful images lead up to an eloquent epiphany about a particular subject. Palmer has spent his career writing against such poems, questioning conventions of self-expression, representation, coherence, and beauty, and resisting the notion that meaning is a fixed commodity which the poet presents to the reader. He rejects such poetry as a "consumer item," preferring a more elusive, mysterious, and non-consumable writing. His is a poetics of teasing concealment: "this letter explains everything and must never be sent." While Palmer desires the reader to be "an active part of the meaning," he designs his poems to prevent us from arriving at a single, coherent understanding of the work that would limit its multiplicity.

Not surprisingly, this makes for a demanding reading experience. Luckily, Palmer at his best reaches a compelling balance between hermeticism and resonant suggestiveness. His enigmatic collages combine multiple, discontinuous voices and recurring motifs with an extreme self-consciousness about the instability of language ("the mystery of how words refer") and self (since "he regards the self as just another sign"). In the series of poems called "Notes for Echo Lake," for example, Palmer manipulates fragments of narrative, which he sees as "something that shimmers at the edge of the page," rather than as a linear progression of events. He scrambles and rearranges these

mysterious shards, leaving us intrigued and moved, yet always unsure and unsettled.

This creation of constant epistemological and ontological uncertainty—referred to as "extreme cognitive dissonance" by one commentator—can be intoxicating and is one of Palmer's strengths:

It had been a good possibly even terrible winter

* * *

We have never been happy here have never been happier here

In both cases, Palmer posits two contradictory possibilities that remain suspended, irreconcilable. Through a variety of strategies, such as puns, lack of punctuation, and unusual line breaks, Palmer creates ambiguous, disorienting situations:

I stood there torn
felt hat in hand
wondering what I had done
to cause this dizziness

'you must learn to live with'

Several possibilities remain active and irresolvable here, since we cannot ascertain if the speaker stands "torn" by emotion while simultaneously feeling his hat in his hand, if the torn person holds a hat made out of felt, or if the "felt hat" itself is torn. Palmer knows that such verbal indeterminacy causes a "dizziness," but it is one that "you must learn to live with."

I find Palmer's poems to be most effective and urgent when the self-reflexive textuality stands in tension with what Wallace Stevens calls "the pressure of reality": for example, when he uses oblique story fragments to explore the possibilities and problems of autobiographical narration, or when he ponders the difficulties of writing about devastation, political violence, and war, such as in "Sun" ("Write this. We have burned all their villages") and "Seven Poems in a Matrix for War," a moving response to the Gulf War and the culture of representation that mediates our experience of horror.

For all its sophistication, ambiguity, and elegant lyricism, Palmer's work can seem rather cold and, at times, impenetrable to a fault. The hermeticism and mysteriousness that Palmer seeks to create can indeed be haunting, but at times the obscurity can simply shut readers out, despite our supposedly active role in making meaning. Furthermore, Palmer's reliance on the jargon of poststructuralism—abstract terms like "trace," "margins," "discourse," "mimesis," "absence," "grammar," and "sign"—results in a less animated and more theoretical rhetoric.

"This is difficult but not impossible," Palmer warns us in one poem, and after reading his work, one feels inclined to agree with his assessment. As Rilke said, it is necessary to "love the difficult and learn to deal with it," and grappling with this poetry that so aggressively questions our accepted notions about meaning and the self has its rewards. Palmer, wary of positing any representation of reality as a "true," consumable one, remains "a philosopher in a doorway [who] insists// that there are no images. He whispers instead: Possible Worlds." By opening our eyes to the possible worlds so inextricable from our words, Michael Palmer's innovative poetry creates an exciting dizziness that we "must learn to

live with."

Andrew Epstein is a doctoral candidate in English at Columbia University, where he teaches American literature and composition. His poems have appeared in *Verse*, *Lullwater Review*, and *Brooklyn Review*.

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