

Mutability and Mortality

Robert Crossley

Frederick Turner, *Latter Days*. Franciscan University Press, 160pp., \$15 paper.

THE EQUIVOCAL TITLE OF FREDERICK TURNER'S LATEST collection of poems calls attention to the rich web of associations that hold this luminous book together. *Latter Days* most pointedly denotes the last stages of a person's life; the poet, not shying away from his circumstances, presents himself in "A Japan Journal, May 2018" as an "ancient primate" and "the old professor," the personae that govern nearly every one of the poems. But "latter days" suggests more broadly the end-times of the planet. Many of the poems are composed in the context of the COVID pandemic, and Turner links his personal end-time to intimations of global catastrophe. Finally, "latter day" carries the sense of someone or something that is a contemporary version of something from the past; Turner often depicts himself as "a live anachronism," a latter-day poet. "I compose in cadences outworn," he writes in "A 'Sonnet' for Leopardi," self-consciously using forms and meters that are out of fashion and that, from the perspective of publishers and MFA programs, seem to belong to earlier eras. The poems of *Latter Days* are suffused with these personal, apocalyptic, and anachronistic senses of aging, existential threat, and traditionalist artistic choices—and often all three senses will be found harnessed together, as in the closing couplet of "Indian Summer": "This is an old man's poem, with plodding rhymes, / An Indian-summer poem, in troubled times."

Before producing his own poetry and fiction, Turner began his career as a scholar of the English Renaissance. The great poets of that period—Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Milton—were preoccupied with the twin themes of mutability and mortality: things (and people) change, and things (and people) die. That Turner writes in that tradition is evident from the opening sonnet, “Spring Harvest,” which serves as prelude to the ten thematic sections of *Latter Days*. The sonnet captures, chillingly, the clean, empty, silent cities during the lockdown days of the pandemic in spring 2020. The natural world (in this poem and in many others in the collection) remains gorgeous and untainted but “Death, the harvester” has come for “his ashen tithe,” taking away the breath of the virus’s respiratory victims. This subject gets its fullest expression in “Posthuman,” fourteen rhymed quatrains that evoke the “Ubi sunt” motif found everywhere in medieval and Renaissance literature in many languages besides the original Latin. It is a motif of lamentation for things and people that no longer exist. Turner universalizes the motif: “The cities still are perfect,” but the libraries and universities are empty; “mothballed galleries and museums / Have no eye to perceive their gathered stuff.” Some parts of the cities remain on automatic pilot, lights still flickering, but the computerized robot-cleaners begin to fail and there is no one to repair programs that cease functioning. One quatrain on the new reign of silence ends with a wicked reminder of the latter-day plague of American massacres:

Nowhere is heard that curious oboe-hooting
That once was human speech, so close and dear.
When there were human selves, and ears to hear.
(Of course there’s also no more sound of shooting.)

The poem neatly juxtaposes some changes that might cause a prospective sigh of relief for this posthuman world (“No sexism, no dogwhistles, no slurs, / No in-law jokes, no microaggressions”) with genuine losses (“no art, no science, no poetizing”). With a glance at Donne, Turner ends with poignant images of a newborn landscape empty of human beings:

No sweet good-morrow with the rising sun,
No pretty spread of legs upon the cover,
No gazing in the strange eyes of your lover,
No wonder at the new world that’s begun.

The lovely and loving images that end “Posthuman” are characteristic of the tone Turner sets throughout most of *Latter Days*. “Beauty is the only final consolation,” he writes in “The Traveler Packs Up His Tent of Words.” It is a trademark line that sums up as succinctly as possible the driving force behind Turner’s poetry and his literary and cultural criticism of the past four decades. He has been on a quest to restore the beautiful line, the beautiful image, the ideal of beauty so often banished from contemporary art and criticism. We have been trained as readers of modern verse to refer to “the speaker” of a poem as an entity separate from the poet. Turner abolishes that distinction; the “I” in these poems is Frederick Turner presenting himself unabashedly naked to his audience. Despite growing old and anxious and occasionally grumpy after “three-quarters of a century,” the poet of *Latter Days* continues to write in his proudly old-fashioned ways about the predicaments of the present and scenarios for the future—and about his persistent desire for beauty. The humanists of the Renaissance understood that desire. They rejoiced in the human form, carving it into marble, exposing its nude flesh in paint, summoning its splendors in verse on the stage. Two of Turner’s most arresting poems luxuriate in anatomical details that are at once clinical and sensuous.

Hamlet’s famous encomium, “What a piece of work is a man!” is echoed in the first line of Turner’s “Body of a Man”: “What is this thing, this noble masterwork?” The answer to that question is a lyrical itemizing of the male form, starting with the head:

Consider him, his temple, cranium,

The arch of brow, the tendon of the neck,

The long jaw gently furred with its dark bloom.

Moving systematically and exquisitely, the poem explores the beauty and power of the body’s structures, until it reaches finally the “central flower” of the genitals. Turner has placed this poem first in Part III which bears the acerbic title, “Toxic Manhood.” Just as Hamlet’s praise of the Renaissance ideal of humanity collapses into a weary dismissal of “this quintessence of dust,” Turner undercuts his exultant panegyric with a concluding complaint against the times: “For who today would celebrate the male, / Or dare to give him any word of praise?” The somewhat hectoring tone at the close of “Body of a Man”—which can also be detected in some of the overtly political poems of Part II, “A House Divided”—is absent from what may be regarded as its companion piece in Part V: “The Poet on His English.” Here Turner humorously—but again sensuously—allegorizes the hybrid English language that the working poet savors as a woman:

Her body—ah, it's so mysterious:
Her Latin nerves, with their ten thousand tones,
Her long French muscles, soft, luxurious,
And still those stone-hard fluted Saxon bones.

Readers of Turner's three magnificent epic poems—*The New World* (1985), *Genesis* (1988), and *Apocalypse* (2016)—know that Milton was his Muse, for scenes, images, and words from *Paradise Lost* insinuated themselves into the texture of his verse. *Latter Days* has its own echoes of and homages to other writers—Keats, Hopkins, Blake, Tolkien, Eliot, and especially Donne—as Turner engages the literary tradition that is his artistic home. There is even a touch of a lost paradise in “The Old Distillery on St. Kitts,” one of the travel poems of Part I. Reflecting cheerlessly on holidaying at the site where soul-crushed slaves worked the sugar fields, the poet damns the colonizers of the Caribbean: “Out of this paradise came living hell.” But the figure that haunts *Latter Days* is named “Mad King Lir” and “The Old Crook.” Shakespeare's *Lear* isn't a muse for Turner so much as a cautionary nemesis, a squatter in the imagination's home, a kind of anti-Turner representing everything the poet is resisting as he faces old age. The *Lear* who utters curses and roars into the wind is the polar opposite of the Turner who aspires to a quietly unsentimental acceptance of, even love for, his place in the universe. It is Cordelia who adumbrates Turner's ethical and existential stance in her unflattering statement of how much she loves her father. Her words constitute the title of one of the poems in Part VI, “According to My Bond, No More, No Less,” words that are also Turner's testament to the quality of his attachment to life and the measure of his detachment from death.

Readers will find a rich array of subjects, of moods, of viewpoints in the eighty-three poems of *Latter Days*, and all of them are the products of a master-craftsman of image and metaphor, of sound and sense, and of a mind that roams at ease across disciplines and cultures. I am not too vain to admit scurrying to Wikipedia for a cheat sheet on the meanings of Dyeu-pater, cytokine, kerykeion, and Ningizzida. With his encyclopedic knowledge, Turner can make music out of the most esoteric and technical terms. To get a sense of the variety of his poetic invention a reader can go to Part VII, “Observations,” for geological contemplations on the “record of the universe” in “Stone”; for the delicate epiphany of the haiku “October Sky” (“This darkening blue / curtain suddenly reveals / it's woven with stars”); and for the stunning shifts in tone in “The Abomination,” a poem prompted by the indescribably malodorous smell brought into the house by Turner's dog after rubbing herself in something foul.

“This poem will start out funnily enough,” Turner warns. “But then it will go gently into hell.” Well, not quite gently. It culminates with Swiftian ferocity in an image of the (unnamed) demonic Donald Trump: “The Twitter feed of the great Lord of the Flies.”

The poems I found myself returning to most often are in the mischievously titled Part VIII: “You Know Who You Are.” These are praise poems dedicated to various people in Turner’s life. A few have names attached to them. “Portrait of a Man” opens with “My friend Fred Feirstein,” his dying, longtime collaborator in the Expansive Poetry movement. We can deduce that “Maya” is the poet’s toddler-granddaughter, that “The Odd Command” is a tribute to his wife, and that “Thirty-Seven Years since You Died,” addressed to “Vic,” is a set of questions posed to his father, the anthropologist Victor Turner. We can look up Katherine Owens and find out that she was a pioneer in Texas avant-garde theater. Others who are named will mean nothing to most readers (Barnaby Fitzgerald, Daisy, ninety-five-year-old Jo). It doesn’t matter; *they* know who they are. The wonder is that, Pygmalion-like, they come to life as Turner conjures them in chiseled lines. Perhaps my favorite in this set of personal homages is “Ode to the Arts and Humanities Staff” which sings the praises of the otherwise unseen and unsung heroes, the clerical and support staffs that keep universities and academic departments running. One of the accomplishments of good poets is that they see, acutely and beautifully, what others overlook, as in these charming couplets:

I’ve seen you with an anxious student, kind,
And making sure the paperwork gets signed;
Seen you with absentminded faculty
Patient beyond all human courtesy;
I’ve seen you hold inside a thoughtful smile
At some transparent folly, guilt, or guile;
I’ve seen your generosity and cheer
And honest clarity, year after year.
Your virtues are not lost in the routine:
My gentle friends, your gifts to us are seen.

The poems in this volume arrive in many metrical schemes and forms: sestina, Spenserian stanzas, haiku, blank verse, the “common measure” of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines, aubade, elegy, ode. The result is a banquet of language, of shapes and sounds. And Turner even executes a nifty reverse acrostic in one of the five “valentines” to his wife in Part IX, spelling out her name backwards at the ends of the six lines: MEI LIN. But the forms Turner loves most—and that are perfectly suited to the complex of themes and emotions that matter to him—are the sonnet and the rhymed quatrains of the ballad. The sonnet’s formality and architectural elegance allow Turner to discover, or create, order out of the chaos of public and private turmoil. And the lilting cadences of the balladic quatrains lighten what might otherwise be a relentless catalogue of endings.

English is often said to be a language poor in rhyme, but Turner’s facility with language and his ear for melody belie that truism. A simile in “Mesophysics” amounts to Turner’s poetic creed: “the echo of the rhyme / Makes out of words the music of the soul.” His rhymes flow naturally and unobtrusively through the stanzas, drawing attention to themselves only when he is being deliberately witty and playful in fashioning unexpected combinations: “close/comatose,” “hiatus/prostrate us,” “candelabra/abracadabra,” “aneurism/anachronism,” “talker/New Yorker,” and, my favorite, “Constantinople/archetypal.” Turner delights in sound, and he does a virtuoso turn with a fourteen-line monorhyme to conclude the collection. All of this is to say that there is a high-spiritedness and an artistic inventiveness in *Latter Days* that ensure that Turner’s reflections on mutability and mortality are never lugubrious or protesting. There is no “rage, rage against the dying of the light,” but rather a stoic acceptance of the nature of things. “All life is farewells, vanishings,” he writes in “Il Faut Laisser . . .,” one of the bravely valedictory poems in the concluding Part X. The title of the monorhymed final sonnet, with its sidelong nod to Donne, looks to put his own inevitable exit into the perspective he has been building throughout this volume: “When the Time Comes, He Forbids Mourning.” A