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The Weather of Memory

Rainstorm Over the Alphabet: Poems 1990-2000
Bill Tremblay
Lynx House Press
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Bill Tremblay's latest poetry collection, *Rainstorm Over the Alphabet*, gives readers a poet-speaker they can depend on to lead them on thoughtful, engaging journeys into personal and collective experiences—and always into the heart of the matter. Rendered in precise and eloquent language, the poems take as their subjects Tremblay's impressions of his own life, from childhood through the very recent past, as well as his impressions of the lives of those he has encountered personally and as a student of history. Tremblay is not afraid to take on large, difficult themes, such as the struggle with spirituality and religion; the merging of dream and reality; the remaking, or re-membering, of the self as part of family and community; the roles of fathers and poets; the search for Home. The poems are spoken in a range of tones: quiet and meditative, touching, slyly humorous, even cynical. As the late poet Larry Eigner might have described Tremblay's enterprise here, "Everything gets in." Yet *Rainstorm* is no hodgepodge of experiences, for the almost-polyphonic poet's voice is compellingly reliable and steadying.

Two of Tremblay's major themes, the need for connection and community, and the search for Home, are introduced in the highly metaphorical poem that opens the book, "Streetlamp." "To be a streetlamp," the speaker says:

> is to make an opening in the sleepless dark
> through which comfort pours
> like a fountain, inviting those who enter
>
> to imagine underground cables
> connecting to the Rawhide Flats power plant. . . .

The poem could be about the task of a Romantic poet to provide illumination for himself and others—but here the poet "[invites] those who enter" to take part in that illumination. The "underground cables" not only allude to sidewalks and streets above them, but also provide a blueprint for the entire book, a map for the journeys that writer and readers will make together, and the energy that will power those journeys.

Throughout the book, the poet weighs the consequences of choices he made decades earlier. In "Church Dream," in which he considers his identity and his relationship with spirituality, he hears St. Francis tell him, "It's all right . . . / you just have spiritual stage fright." Continuing the slightly humorous tone, the speaker remarks to his brother, who has escorted him to the dream church, "I walked out on all this— / the sheep, the goats, the wheat, the chaff." "I know," the brother responds; "you made your desk your altar." Sometimes the language of dream is necessary to bring clarity to "reality."

Other poems speak of serious reckoning and sometimes regret. In "Auto-Surgery," for example, the speaker admits "I [dragged] my shadow / toward a liquor store" before coming to the important realization that "[t]o save my life / it [would become] necessary to take myself seriously / apart." The result of such risky surgery is that "there was no longer a first person." And in "The Sagebrush Hours" the poet writes poignantly of a son, abandoned emotionally years earlier by a father lost to a bar, booze, and a band with a torchy sax. The speaker describes the boy's situation with great candor and tenderness:

> You were eight when you walked,
> all by yourself, across the dusty road
> to the Sagebrush Bar to see what was
> in there that made your father prefer
> it to you.

Later in the poem, the speaker must own up to the fact that the son was:

> . . . alone, shivering, ice
> forming in your heart
> freezing closed
> on little hingelike wings.

In "Iron Mountain" the father becomes a son again, as the speaker matter-of-factly refers to "the black punishment / corner of my bedroom"—as if every child experienced banishment on a regular basis. An insightful interpreter of common experience, in "Ode for the Sleepless" he speaks for insomniacs everywhere, who, "[b]athrobed, alone, yawning / . . . put the kettles on."

The past both invades and brings a kind of uneasy comfort. On a journey to Mexico that might have allowed the poet to get away from it all, in "Yucatan Dream," the poet moves into the purest moment which contains it, but barely:

> That night
> in Merida, I dream of standing
> on my Aunt Lil's balcony looking
> out on the small park where
>
> Uncle Bill taught me to ride
> my first bicycle. A Yucatan sky
> curves like a hall of bougainvillea
> above my hometown elms. . . .

Historical figures, such as Leon Trotsky, exiled in Mexico in the 1930's, also become players in the poet's experience. In "Trotsky's Double at Moscow Station," historical event informs, or invades, the identity of the poet. Past and present, historical and personal all merge in a larger human story.

In the final poems in the book, the poet returns to personal landscapes, both geographical and figurative. Again he works at reconciling with his past and present, for example, by paying homage to old girlfriends ("Joanne," "Old Girlfriend Dream") and even to deceased pop stars ("Tiny Tim As I Remember Him"). More important, he must come to terms with the sudden loss of sight in one eye:

> One October morning
> half my world goes missing
> and in its stead a praeternatural dark
> like a church without a faith. ("Blind Side")

Written over a decade, the fifty-one poems in Bill Tremblay's *Rainstorm Over the Alphabet* add up to a poetic memoir. Although a poet of remembrance and reckoning, Bill Tremblay is never a poet of stasis. As his speaker declares late in the book, "All you can think of is that you're / lucky to live in a town with a river, / a little something going on all the time" ("Uses of the Slow Fade").