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Matthew Roth
Messiah College, mroth@messiah.edu

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DALLAS WIEBE. *On the Cross: Devotional Poems*. Telford, Pa.: DreamSeeker Books, 2005. 96 pp. \$12.95.

CHERYL DENISE. *I Saw God Dancing*. Telford, Pa.: DreamSeeker Books, 2005. 90 pp. \$12.95

SHARI WAGNER. *Evening Chore*. Telford, Pa.: DreamSeeker Books, 2005. 108 pp. \$12.95

Reviewed by Matthew Roth *

When I agreed to review three volumes of poetry in the DreamSeeker Poetry Series, a series from DreamSeeker Books devoted to publishing "Anabaptist-related poets," I came to the task fairly certain of what I would find. Most of the poems would be of the brief, narrative variety. Of these, many if not most would concern themselves with family history, with what it means to be a Mennonite in these modern times, and with personal questions of faith and doubt. A good number of the poems would feature stern-looking women who spend most of their time canning and baking and cleaning, all while never once complaining. Lastly, the poems would be written in the first-person, plain, free verse style best described as unassuming.

I'm happy to report that I was only about half right. Dallas Wiebe's *On the Cross: Devotional Poems* certainly deals with questions of faith, but it does so from a meditative, rather than a narrative, perspective. Each of the poems in the volume devotes itself to some aspect of the image and/or meaning of the cross. Many of the poems are ekphrastic, meaning they meditate on a visual artist's rendition of the cross. These artists range from El Greco to Dali; however, most of the ekphrastic poems center on a series of crosses by the sculptor Paul Friesen.

Friesen's modernist variations on the traditional form of the cross provide an interesting perspective from which to

* Matthew Roth is Assistant Professor of English at Messiah College.

view Wiebe's verse. Most striking for me were the ways in which the poems actually depart from the formal spirit of the work that inspires them. Friesen, whose work is artfully illustrated throughout the book, freely manipulates his crosses, causing them to curl and bend with spiritual and emotional energy. By departing from the traditional form of the cross, the ubiquity of which contributes to its being taken for granted, Friesen helps us see the cross with new eyes. It's like singing the Doxology by a different tune; all of a sudden, you have to pay attention.

Unfortunately, Wiebe's poems rarely manage the same effect. Part of the problem is formal. While the sculptures and paintings that inspire Wiebe's poems work by a process of formal defamiliarization, Wiebe's poems deliver very little in way of formal surprise. Wiebe's most striking formal choice is his use of highly anaphoric lines reminiscent, to the eye at least, of the visionary style of Allen Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, and, most importantly, the Psalms. But the power of the visionary line is not itself a formal function of the line but of the emotional, even ecstatic energy that propels the line. It's here that Wiebe's poems too often leave us cold, as in this excerpt from "The Light of the World":

We had but to believe
 and the light would break forth
 and remain forever and ever.
 Instead of the simple acceptance,
 we built bombs, hate and aggression.
 We took the light into the skies
 in laser weapons.
 We created a light of our own
 to dash the nations.
 We broke forth our own light
 and it was lethal.

There's nothing wrong with the idea here; the poems in *On the Cross* are full of good ideas. But poems, as Stephane Mallarme famously declared, "are made of words, not of

ideas.” The good sense in Wiebe’s poems is too often conveyed in language that fails to enliven the meaning the words declare. Here, as throughout the book, there are too many inert moments where the language is either used up (“break forth,” “forever and ever,” “simple acceptance”) or abstract and generalized (“hate and aggression,” “dash the nations”). It’s not that I don’t admire what Wiebe is trying to say in his poems. On the contrary, many of the poems are clear-headed and wise. If the sole purpose of the poems is to impart insight into our lives as Christians and as citizens of the world, then Wiebe’s book is a success. If, on the other hand, the function of poetry is, as Sidney once wrote, “to teach and delight,” then I’m less convinced.

Upon first glance, Cheryl Denise’s book, *I Saw God Dancing*, seemed to readily fit my preconceived notions of it. Here were the brief anecdotes about Mennonite life and history, couched in modest, uninflected free verse. The first poem in the book, “Before the Service,” begins like this:

He meanders in grace,
 eyes wrinkling into his cheeks,
 lips mingling with the divine,
 arms reaching heaven.
 He hushes sin in a breath,
 his hands stained with prayer.

This seemed to me an inauspicious beginning. As was the case with Wiebe’s poems, I found myself frustrated by the lack of vitality in the language of the poem, a lack of care for the images carried by the words. I don’t know what it looks like to “meander in grace” or how lips can share space with a generalized abstraction. Do prayer-stained hands look different from other kinds of hands? I know, of course, that these declarations are figurative; the problem is that they don’t have any literal meaning out of which the figurative, or connotative, can extend.

This failure of the literal realm is particularly dangerous for those who choose to write in the plain style, for by making

the language of the poem largely transparent, even more pressure is put on image and subject. If we cannot find delight, or surprise, in the words themselves, we must find it, dramatically, in the scene. This can, of course, be done. Many contemporary surrealist poets—I'm thinking of people like Russell Edson, Charles Simic, and James Tate—use a plain, matter-of-fact style in a way that actually heightens the absurdity of their subject matter. In this case, the plain style itself is part of the surprise. Among more personal poets, the charge often comes from a willingness to confront with unflinching honesty uncomfortable, and sometimes shocking, truths about the self.

This latter approach, absent for much of the first half of Denise's book, asserts itself more consistently as the book goes on. The best of the lot are the amatory poems, those that address love and desire, in all their manifestations. Even the language of the poems here becomes more vibrant, as in these lines from "Driving Home Alone":

My foot floors the curves,
 my hand smooths the folds of my dress,
 the old familiar longing to feel
 the swell of your child.
 Your image dark, beautiful,
 in the face of every brazen trucker,
 in crowded five-star restaurants,
 in theaters sticky with the smell of butter.

There is here an intensity of feeling and a density of lyric expression that is missing in many of the early poems. Suddenly, so much more is at stake. Poems like "Martha," "Bathsheba," "God," and "Jagged Dreams," balance degrees of rage, sadness, ecstasy and joy with depth and dexterity. I'm left to wonder if these later poems are written in a more recently discovered style. If so, we have much to look forward to in Denise's next book.

Evening Chore, by Shari Wagner, a Mennonite poet from Indiana, is easily the most accomplished and delightful of the

three volumes here considered. Wagner is, in many ways, the Mennonite poet I've been searching for: one that can express the many themes and variations that inform Mennonite experience while at the same time indulging herself in the beauty and music of poetic speech. Wagner is proof that ordinary experience need not require an ordinary medium for its expression. Listen to these lines from "The Birders of Cool Creek Park":

Come snow-glare or storm-light,
come swaths of gold to shift
through leaves, come mist to cleave
to mud, these Saturday morning
pilgrims keep to trails hemmed
by Wal-Mart and Discount
Tires. . . .

I say listen to, rather than read, these lines because their first allegiance is to the ear. Like birders deep in the riparian underbrush, we listen through the thicket of language for the familiar chimes of shift-mist, leaves-cleave, and pilgrims-hemmed. The sonic contours are such that we cannot help but be drawn in.

While Wagner's poems are a pleasure to hear, they are every bit as stunning in their depth and range. There are poems of family and of history, of the rural and domestic, but there are also poems based on classical myths and poems set in places as diverse as Kenya and the Isle of Iona. Whatever the setting or subject, and however beautiful the expression, Wagner's acute insight and eye for the telling image are ever-present. In "The Farmer's Wife," for instance, we are given a subtle portrait of a midwestern woman landlocked by her marriage:

I had married a man who counted
his fortune by the number of bushels,
by the starlings he shot from the rafters.
For every machine he buys,

I buy another tree,
a quaking aspen,
to grow in the circle
reaching around my house.
Whenever a gale comes from the North,
I stand against the kitchen screen
and hear the leaves
like rising water.

Here, as in most of the poems, Wagner's images speak eloquently on the literal level while at the same extending meaningfully into the figurative. No detail is lost or unimportant, the experience is both seen and felt. Taken as a whole, *Evening Chore*, is an accomplishment worthy of praise and a wider readership. Wagner's poems are a testament to the notion that poetic speech differs from other forms of expression not just in the content of that speech but in the texture and plenitude of the language itself.