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Introduction [Speech about Roy Beckemeyer]

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Introduction

“One with the earth in our completion” read the ending lines for Roy Beckemeyer's superb poem, “We Discuss the Geomorphology of Life.” As soon as I finished the poem, I read it again because its depth and beauty, originality and voice, and then accepted it immediately, along with other poems by Roy, for publication on the 150KansasPoems website.

Roy has a way of approaching poetry that is both expansive and precise. He instinctively trusts the poem of the image to convey the poem's layers of meaning, and he also leaps off any familiar edge to try new forms, new inspirations, and new rhythms to construct and unearth new poetry. In *Music I Could Once Dance To*, his first collection of his poetry, he uses the theme of music to poetically travel to the interior, throughout a life's experiences, and across the prairie and the earth.

Beginning with the invocation of “In This Poet's Notebook,” he shares with us the tools and dreams informing his writing and life, including “A glass form pulled from a blowpipe/ like a child from a womb” and “Bridge/ trusses, airliners, steam locomotives. Living/ things with wings.” As a retired aeronautical engineer as well as a lover of fossilized insects in specific, and the living earth and its history in general, Roy is very much at home with both the things humans can build and the world we inhabit.

Roy also writes about time, including his own history, such as in the wonderful poem, “A Year in Small-Town Illinois: 1953 in Tanka,” in which he uses the Japanese form to illuminate moments in all their vividness that compose a year. Each month another bead on the necklace of 1953, he shows well how it's in the experience encapsulated in a potent image that we find our way backwards and forward throughout our life to see more clearly what shapes us. Writing about February, for example, he tells us a whole story and revelation in few words:

skating on Shoal Creek -
ice cracks like a rifle shot

and transforms us both
from skaters into swimmers
huddled steaming by the fire

Ending this poem with the words, “nothing ever happens here,” he points to the misguided sense we tend to have about where and what we live while also reminding us that quite a bit is happening all the time if we can just open our eyes.

Roy's poetry is all about expanding our vision, especially to see what's beyond our thoughts and thinking. Whether writing about the “Morning Moon” (“I mean the glossy white 20-pound bond moon/ the cotton-ball moon, the dollop of cream moon,/ the freshly-bleached sheet moon”) or how center-pivot sprinklers “dance a spindly-legged/ ballet around the fields,/ their moist breath vanishing” in “It is August in Western Kansas,” he helps readers see the extraordinary in the ordinary. He also helps us feel the textures and nuances of the living world, such as in “Cityscape at Night - Call It a Love Poem,” in which he writes, “I am unrolling/ before you scrolls in Braille and palimpsests/ layers in topography: the language/ of love made manifest.”

Guided equally by his ear, he turns up the music in the moment. “Night Music” makes audible the rhythm of trains:

As they picked up speed,
their wheels would rub
the rails like a web finger along
the edge of a crystal goblet,
the rails singing their high
pitched harmonies out along
those great lengths of steel.

In “Tornado Warning,” he shows us how “the mule alone in the barn/ braying for redemption” is “the closest thing/ to a wailing siren/ we can hear.” All of his poems, from “A Kansas Farmwife's Snow

Song” to “Kasantatieh” help us hear where we are, who's been here before us, and how every step we take lands us on sounds and silences from a multitude of others.

Roy also is a gentle and constant force of nature when it comes to helping others find and sustain their voice. Active in the Wichita writing community, and statewide through the Kansas Authors Club, plus other projects, he and his wife Pat help support people cultivating meaning, connection and community through the writing life. Roy has made his community richer and more vibrant through reaching out to others in community as well as on the page. It's a joy to see his first book reach us as well.

The total effect of sound and image, past and present, the made world and the found earth unfurls across the landscape of this book. Step over the threshold, and see and hear the resonances of your own life in these poems.

~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

2009-13 Kansas Poet Laureate