

MOMENTARY STAYS

Review of

DEATH EAT

by Ron Seitz

Cincinnati: Spotlight Press, 1987

93p. \$7.95 [Paperback]

--Reviewed by **Leon V. Driskell**

Poetry, as Robert Frost wrote in 1939 ("The Figure a Poem Makes"), "begins in delight and ends in wisdom," and the figure for poetry is "the same as for love." The poem ends "in a clarification of life -- not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion." For Ron Seitz, those momentary stays are "a few bright back-burner memories" that "flash aflame/ the iris of the eye." They are "sepia mist/ eating our death," and "if/ (after all) it/ really comes to/ nothing &/ we all die for-/ gotten-some/ lost stone in weedy/ grass, my grave-/ mark hello to/ whoever comes/ after."

The prologue and epilogue to *Death Eat* amount to a modest but quietly heroic affirmation of the act of poetry, which, in the epilogue, Seitz characteristically speaks of as "talking you/ this book." He regards his poems and his gravemark as a means of speech to other people. The subject of poems is "joyed nostalgia" (that delight Frost wrote about), frozen (or freed) sometimes in dreams or in photographs (suggested by the sepia mist) and sometimes run in the mind like movies. "Joyed nostalgia" keeps alive the memories of the poet's parents and grandparents, of poets and artists and other people he has known, and of the great living undead he has known no less intimately through their work. If the memories are sometimes tinged with pain, if the landscapes of recollections are drear sometimes and tawdry -- well, what of it? No love poem uninformed by the whiff of mortality speaks to us truly, or convincingly, of love.

From title and dedication to the epilogue, Ron Seitz reminds his readers that his subject is "our passing-thru." In "Birthplace Memory Vision," a memory trip "back to place of birth" brings with it "the empty stab pain of it" and a "shock of horror" and, finally, that "spectre of bedraggled droopants old bum/ a wino standing that field of weeds my house should stand." The birthplace itself a blank, the poet realizes what he sees is "just a small piece of imagination/ memory vision/ that kind of movie, this --"

around the corner, down
a drift of ghosts afloat the air St. Martin's churchyard:
white angel'd statue sky -- reaching to heaven, caught --
forever there the light glow eternal image

□ **Leon V. Driskell** teaches at the University of Louisville and publishes criticism, fiction, and poetry. He participated in the Symposium at the Louisville School of Art marking the tenth anniversary of Merton's death, and he has reviewed *A Merton Concelebration: Tributes from Friends of the Poet-Monk* (edited by Deba Prasad Patnaik, Ave Maria Press, 1981) and *The Gethsemani Poems* (Ron Seitz, Larkspur Press, 1985). Driskell's *Passing Through: A Fiction* appeared in 1984 (Algonquin) and one of his recent stories was reprinted in Shannon Ravenel's *New Stories from the South: The Best, 1986* (Algonquin). W. D. Snodgrass selected two of his poems as among the best submitted to the annual "Eve of St. Agnes Poetry Competition" and these poems will appear in the forthcoming issue of *Negative Capability* (University of South Alabama, Mobile).

behind my eyes turned on late anight
reclines to dream --

a write to remember the still point:
a silent sing ringing round my biograph
this passing thru

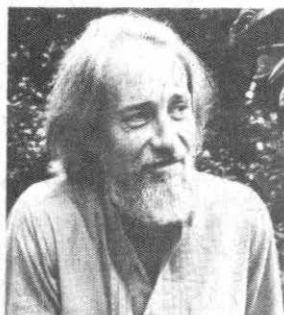
In a poem called "Autograph," Seitz speaks of himself as breathing "bits of World as I go/ riding the piece of Time." "Name if you will," he tells himself. "Face heavy with days, tell self:/ speak your say, then go/ talk the Thing that wakes your Who/ lights bright the passing-thru/ of age & age the motions mount/ called Life by those who choose to count." And in "Birthday Poem," Seitz himself chooses to count and speaks of "This, my twenty-fifth year/ Into Death."

When Seitz learned that his friend -- and Thomas Merton's friend -- novelist/essayist John Howard Griffin was dying in Texas, he addressed a poem called "Death" to him. That poem combines a sense of the transient with the on-going process and invokes again the recurrent metaphor of the motion picture. The poem is about loss and grief, a feeling of incompleteness, of paralysis and inability to leave the past behind and move into, and with, the present and future. The poem's ideas and images occur in an almost surreal pattern of juxtapositions, and throughout, the poet's occasional wrenching of expected word-order and syntax swells the individual significances into larger possibilities. In the fifth strophe, Seitz writes,

These are my first words in months
I can fee' the hollow circles of my eyes as I write
They even make dolls that cry
An interminable movie unreels before me
Parra is the last poet poetry ends with Parra
A very good cemetery
If you see Tom Merton tell him I'm dead
Tell him I'm sorry but it was unexpected like birth
I wasn't ready for what came between

What comes between birth and death, no matter how unexpected, is the business at hand. "There must be a cure for Time, John," he tells Griffin. "You have Christ/ and I have Ron Seitz." A homely image prepares for the poem's conclusion, and the poem comes to rest in what Seitz, and the rest of us, can make of our "passing-thru."

The tip of my dog's tail just waved past the window
The children will be home soon
Love has to replace the person who wrote these words



LEON V. DRISKELL

Photo by Sue Driskell

Though Merton had long been dead on the date of this poem, September 9, 1980, and though Griffin's death was certain, the tip of a dog's tail waving past the window was enough to call Seitz back to the business at hand. As Richard Wilbur has told us, "Love Calls Us to the Things of this World."

Such a stay against confusion is not so momentary after all.

In addition to prologue and epilogue, Seitz has here collected forty-six poems, written over the span of several years, but nearly all of them sensuous and immediate. Nowhere does the reader suffer the embarrassment of running across a poem which seems to have been written by Somebody Else -- a relic of

the poet's earlier enthusiasm best left uncollected. The poet's parents and grandparents, an uncle, and scenes of the poet's boyhood provide much of the emotional substance which makes the book cohere, but the poet's singleness of purpose -- his sheer seriousness about the act of poetry -- serves to expand the center without lessening the collection's intensity. Images of dancing and of Vaudeville recur as part of the poet's "joyed nostalgia," but so also do the names of writers, artists, performers, and social activists: Vincent Van Gogh, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Merton, Lenny Bruce, Martin Luther King Jr., Rudolph Valentino, and Guillaume Apollinaire. "A Broken Poem" (see pp. 14-16), written for Thomas Merton, begins with a schoolroom recollection of "a straightback pale nun with round glasses" reciting "O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!" The poem's first six sections summarize, sometimes humorously, sometimes seriously but always incisively, a boy's introduction to poetry and his growing engagement with it. The final section recapitulates and offers homage to Merton.

Poets all of them
 good seed gone to weeds
 bad seed blown over continents
 and today
 in the light of your "waterfall of silence"
 I stand
 with a broken poem in my eyes

For sheer intensity and imaginative reach, no poem in *Death Eat* surpasses "Vaudeville Dancer," which opens the collection. The poem is a memory of the poet's father, "dreamed from some depth that opened in my nighttime lonely musing to the ceiling/ that stark image of you out of a long lost photograph clicked shut in the falling twenties." A "torn poster of my imagination stuck ripped against the bricks behind and above you/ a reminder of that ghost time when you tapped those skinny legs inside bloopy Fred Astaire pants." The poet asks, "bear with me Dad I'm trying to reach out/ with words with poetry a kiss that runs your ribcage thru/ a finger to touch the hot point/ the nerve that is you and can never stop ringing." The melding occurs, as it must, through an act of imagination:

yes Dad I walked that skinny frame with you along pavements
 through dancehalls
 and you too turned a leather jacket collar up and shot a
 handsome glance that melted hearts in some forgotten
 1954 walk through eternity with me
 both of us young and now meeting

The collection's single prose poem, "The Old Ones," epitomizes Ron Seitz' belief in, and practice of, the imaginative act. A boy squeezes his eyes shut tight to go "places only his mind had seen" and then puts the places "into the memory of the old ones" and, finally draws those places "forth through his own dreaming: a vision." First, the images -- close-seen and particular -- come through the man, then through the woman, and finally from both man and woman. The poem's climax comes with an extension of consciousness to "all the others, like them --"

near sleep in the far houses, warm inside beneath a roof, safe and sheltered too from the night and the quiet of crickets, the moving branch shadows past the pane and across the moon now yellow and cloud-hiding to shine the frozen gully -- puddles in the plowed farm rows, to whiten the frost on the dirt mounds, shivering the brittle weeds, the road still moving.

All of it: part of the dark pulled down behind the eyes closed for sleep.

John Keats had in mind such imaginative identification when he spoke of "negative capability," and Robert Frost admired the "precious quality" of a poem's "having run itself and carried away the poet with it." The poem, Frost said, "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove. . . must ride on its own melting." The mystic no less than the poet understands the possibility of finding oneself by losing oneself.