

Review of *Red Has No Reason*, by JoAnne Growney

Richard Aston

Dear JoAnne,

Regarding the book of poems, *Red Has No Reason* I respond: the title means we often act on the basis of feeling rather than reason; red being the color of strong emotion: for me I like to think reason overpowers passion unless passion be an underlying drive in one direction. In “How did it come to this” you note “Poems we make by erasing” I say

Design requires analysis and synthesis repeated time and again
Each pass an implication of the Grand Unified Theory
Each pass causing a disturbance like
the Susquehanna flooding its dike.

This is a rationale for practice as in learning a song, or a poem for recitation as you say “lonely practice broken by a moment's flight” (p 10). I sing in choruses a lot and am impressed how much practice it takes, and the performance is done only once or twice and poof. “Exercise” (p 13) is a nice giddy up horse poem like one I wrote about my twin who died young

O yes the leaves came while still there was bloom
that launched on the wind to give the green room
as it flew in the sky the pink pedals clapped
not audience like but more with the snap
of a thorough pony gated to prance
with a belle ballerina, smooth on his back
to a place where they say there is nothing to lack.

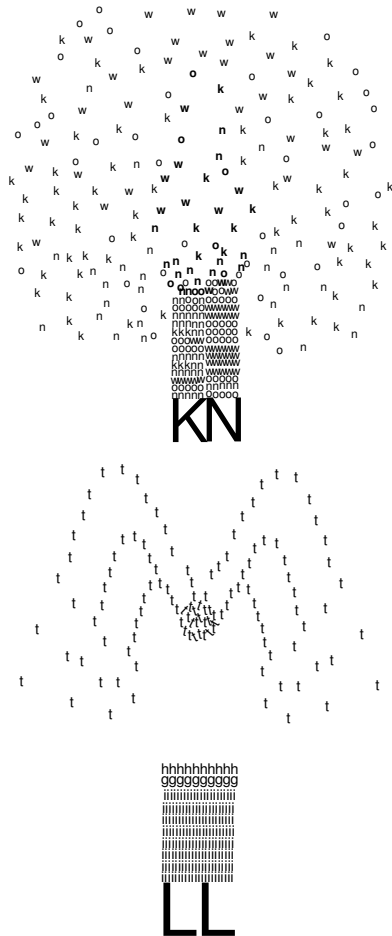
In “Clarification” (p 14) you say “water is spirit”. A theologian friend of mine, Dane Gordon, reminded me of this after he read my line:

In the pond are a thousand different creatures
equalized by the brevity of their futures
but the water lasts, its atoms have been
together for years, counted in the billions

Then you say

“She made light, she divided it into darkness”. My latest visual poem goes

BECOMING



Richard Aston

In “Suicide Mission” you speak of fish who spawn and die in the process. So do we all eventually. In my poem on conditionals I conclude “If art breeds art there’s hope”. Just the fact of reproduction, whether biological or intellectual, this is a hopeful sign.

I like the insight in your modern version of the creation story in “Horizon” following the biblical line. We look to Stephen Hawking for his take in our age. I have his latest book, *The Grand Design*, on order. In “Present Tense” enter your mother, your single parent by death of your father. Do we conclude she made you rigorous, as a mathematician must be? No wonder she admired Esther Williams’ perfect dives you present in “Symmetry”. My builder father used to say, “perfection is not for this world”. The tolerances in masonry are much looser than carpentry, and certainly in steel work and electronics where you can get down to one quarter of a micron. His trade mark was indeed an asymmetry he left upon arches, it was his master’s touch. That is, a mason is more like an artist who paints by hand than a computer graphics artist who can use machine perfection. Of course as you point out in “Can a Mathematician See Red” (p.

31), a quarter micron can be gross error to a mathematician. So the mathematician must conclude to her mother's wish for perfection in behavior: "Anticipating evil helps it happen". You say in "Keeping Watch" a poem about the religiously faithful's anxiety over people with bad habits. Today we have good reason to warn others that smoking can lead to cancer and drugs and alcohol to early death and misery. But ignoring the church? the consequences are less clear. And it is a fact that most accidents are caused by human error; ie not anticipating problems and training to avoid them. The sonnet "Susquehanna Winter" (p 37) reaches for lyrical perfection. "My son suggests I quit these fantasies and get a dog." Our dog died a couple of weeks ago, and the loss is emotional. We need each other, which includes all life, animal and vegetable. Here's my winter lyric

The clouds are mist among the trees.
 But lucky for me, the night's cold breeze
 has pug a crust upon the snow
 to make a way for me to go.

The "Pages of Unsaid Words" grieves for the abused workers in China. That country has had two decades of economic growth and threatens the United States as the world's leading economic power. What can we learn from that communist country? My dissertation for the PhD degree was a study of the tactile vocoder, a device for presenting speech sounds to the deaf through the fingers. In fact one calculated result anticipated specifications on how many channels would be needed to get intelligible speech through a cochlear implant. I said 8 or more. About 24 are used in modern versions of this implant; this is not so far off, considering how many numbers there are. This news falls easily "On Deaf Ears". (p 46). Another insight into worker abuse:

Like dust into a Hoover —
 touted as a time saving
 invention, but women
 know only it raised
 our standards for clean.

Indeed technological progress comes with unintended consequences: my couplet for this about a laborer using a concrete mixer goes:

Now the laborer must keep up with a machine,
 and industrial giant turned into a fiend.

The bosses in a factory can get more work out of assembly line workers by turning up the speed of the conveyor belt. The manager-worker conflict is as old as civilization, at the beginning of which the manager would direct the plow that the worker pulled.

Regarding "Time" (p 60). Einstein said time is relative, the speed of light is the constant. The ancient biblical insight "There is a time for everything under the sun". When you get as old as I am you understand better "a thousand years is but a day in the eyes of the Lord". We ought to be wise enough to learn from cats who "sit composedly and watch dogs chase turning wheels" (p

61). In “Fear” (p 62) you present the ultimate brave soldier “Grandfather feared nothing on this earth but doing wrong.” This could lead to the analysis paralysis of a theoretical mathematician who is never satisfied with his or her model of physical constructs. It all depends on how one determines what is right. A strategy that abandons reason entirely for passion is given in your line (64):

liars make good
lovers committed
to pretend

Speaking of “Conditionals” (p 68) one I have goes

If art breeds art, there’s hope.

Your back-to-nature “Stress Remedy” (p69) is right on target. And regarding Gods (p 70) consider

In poetry we hear the soul of the people.
In science, the accumulation of ordered and objective knowledge
we encounter reality.

The question is what is reality? That is taken up by Stephen Hawking in his latest book, *The Grand Design*. As Tennyson weasel worded

There is more faith in honest doubt
Believe me than in half the creeds.

And Tillich says faith includes doubt, at the heart of the scientific method.

Your mother persists even onto page 73 where the exquisite quatrain has

My mother made much of helpful little girls.
Praise still persuades me ...

And in response to “Aurora Borealis” (p 76) I have

TRADEOFFS

The Carl Sagan Lander boyoings on Mars like
a sequence of parabolas.
Designed and built through Cal Tech,
it conveys the mentality of
a beach boy who has repressed his desire
to color it, say, violet black and mauve,

to be offset by Mars' pink sky,
or, maybe, yellow green and brown, like a beach ball.

Why red the laser color of choice?
Would green complicate too much,
take something not off Radio Shack's shelf?

Imagine a lander
with both flame and color to slow it down.

Well, JoAnne, here I engage *Red has no Reason* as a conversation piece. I see it at root philosophical, as mathematics is, at least for me who uses it mostly to describe machine processes. Google “Medical Imaging Equipment Theory” Aston, and you will see my latest work. We both come to poetry, not out of the literature of story, but from rigorous study of logic and the scientific method. So it is not surprising our poetry emphasizes craft, the description of objects. I have noticed my poetry is appreciated more by visual artists — painters, sculptors, and architect's than main line poets. But what unites us all is careful use of the language, whatever the lexicon. Another common thread is the effect of being raised by a single parent, one being lost by death. That experience imposes a certain perspective that comes from early maturity. That and your mathematics root contributes greatly to the uniqueness of your poetry.

Best regards,

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