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Something to Celebrate: A Good Long While to Find Our Way Home

Rick Campbell. *Sometimes the Light*. Main Street Rag, 2022.

Part elegy, confession, and vision quest, Rick Campbell's *Sometimes the Light* marks the debut collection of a first-rate essayist. From the dreadfully late transcontinental train ride to the final homage to Phil Levine, the book dives deep, then lifts us up for breath.

Gritty with slag-drowned rivers and pipe flames bursting through the bedroom windows of his childhood, Campbell's Pittsburgh is as visceral in prose as he's ever rendered it in his critically acclaimed poetry. He revisits haunts in Pennsylvania, where "my father was seeing another woman and eventually that drove my mother to leave him and us, to come back again, to try to kill herself, and then to leave and come back one more time . . . ." The swirling vortex of the mother being sent off to Dixmont, and the fragile family's lurch toward Florida, intertwine, and there is unexpected hope. In "The New World,"

> I found something on that trip, some little part of me that became, as time went on, a part I could only find on the road. It was the part of me I liked best . . . . I was free from my life, someone without a father or a history; I could be on vacation, a holiday, an adventure . . . . I maybe made up my first story and began to redefine myself then and there in the dark night seats, talking, listening, playing bus games . . . . It was something to celebrate.

Florida signifies the act of reinvention, "where I think of putting up a set of reflectors, some hieroglyphic that says you are home . . .," as Campbell writes in "Appaloosas in the Vineyard."

Other essays are brutal. They take us down and hold us there. "Dying and Living," records the moments after Campbell's mother's death:

> I stood on the bank of the Earman River that ran behind her trailer. It was just after daylight, and I listened to the February wind cut across the water. Two egrets perched on the opposite shore . . . . The rattling palmetto sounded plastic: I watched

> them load her body into the back of the van and drive off. At each speed bump they came almost to a stop and their brake lights flashed back at me.

Again, the reprieve comes none too soon: "three years later my daughter was born . . . who would grow up hearing about Granny Rose who would have loved her more than anything . . . ."

The age-old search for home figures prominently here, as does the notion of self-forgiveness. In "Appaloosas . . .," the narrator celebrates the home and family he has craved his whole life: "I want to thank something for this life. Some force or spirit—call it luck or love—brought this brown house to me and led me, finally, after years of scrambling, home."

The fall is sudden and absolute.

"I'm living in my dead brother's trailer," Campbell writes in "Snake, Jasper, Custer," ". . . on a far corner of my (or our?) five acres because I fucked up. It's an American story, I guess; more male than female I suppose." Like the snake-bit stray dog his brother adopted, the narrator is cautious: ". . . there's always a chance that we will make one terrible misstep, let our guard down for a couple of seconds and pay dearly for our mistakes."

The final essay in Campbell's collection, "Worthy to Receive: Philip Levine and Me," originally published in *The Georgia Review*, pays homage to the poet whose *Not This Pig* gave Campbell "license to write about my life and the lives I knew . . . . It was as if my hometown's mill siren blew and its fires danced in the sky . . . ." After reading Campbell's poetry collection *The History of Steel*, Levine wrote, "This guy is as bad as I am, he just won't get over the old place & the lost way of life." The essay's punchline: *To be as bad as Philip Levine*. The honesty and courage of *Sometimes the Light* is plenty bad, a redemption song here, grace for defective souls.