

Jane Varley

Contemplating Defiance

Jeff Gundy. *Somewhere Near Defiance: Poems*. Tallahassee: Anhinga Press 2014.

Because Jeff Gundy is an Ohio poet, I knew that his title *Somewhere Near Defiance* might refer to the town of Defiance in northwest Ohio. It does, as we find out in the first four words of the book. “I live near Defiance,” declares the title poem. The layered meaning of that declaration is what makes it most interesting, and for me, creates a provocative route into the book. How are the poems defiant? What is being defied? And what is this business of “near”? Is he defiant or not? What about “live”? To live near Defiance is to live in a state of near defiance?

Formally, the poems are only slightly defiant. They are melodious and deeply lyrical in the best kinds of ways. Mostly Gundy relies on the couplet, contemporizing it with long breaths and a prosey, contemplative ambling, unconcerned with syllabics. Sometimes, as in “Listening for Orpheus,” the poem ends with a single, defiant line, dangling, after the regular use of couplets, like caution thrown to the wind:

To sleep in a room where even the sound of the rain
reaches only your dreams. To dream a dark street

shining beneath the old and erotic trees, to dream
a music born of wood and air, fire and muscle, leaping

and astonished, three voices none of them your own.

Musical language like this is not defiance. It is harmony. The poems are gorgeous and persuasive. I feel enclosed in them, comforted.

But it is not just about the comforts of pretty lines on the page; once you start, you can’t stop seeing the juxtapositions and leaps, as in “Something the Winter Wren Didn’t Say”:

Any place to sit will do because I am to disobey,
to disappear, to wait and listen till the hard earth

shudders open like a touch-me-not.

The poems are filled with a sense of inquiry, belief, and desire, yet they are powerfully sensitive to mystery and paradox, like the touch-me-not that is one tap away from bursting open. Poetry, as a marginalized form, is by its nature disobedient (I first read Gundy's book during a faculty meeting), but here "defiance" is private, is invested in discovery, is quietly bold and purposeful. Several of the poems have the word "meditation" in the title, and one of the five sections consists totally of pieces that are titled "Contemplation on" or "with." In other sections you find a "rumination" and two "intimations." What is the poet devoting himself to in these pieces? Well, just about everything: eyeglasses, the night sky, obscure information, assorted pronouns and personas, a suburban balcony, and bad news. The poems like to wander and invite us along. I am reminded of the late, great poet Jay Meek, who took us, before we knew it, upon the magic carpet of his mind, into territories of nature and the trivial, the everyday, and the sublime.

Like Meek's work, Gundy's book encouraged me to think about subtleties. (Perhaps this is one of the great legacies of meditation, where the subtle switches places with the obvious.) And the word "near," as per the book's title, recurred to me as a powerful theme of space and existence. Is the nearness of defiance a bit more powerful than defiance itself? To be in that space of the almost, the not quite, the perchance. Isn't there a thrill there, to contemplate the maybeness of possibility?

The pen in my hand writes red, not quite blood. If I have a soul,
it might be like this, thin, wet, smelling of copper and iron.
(*"Table"*)

I don't know if I have a soul. I'd like to think that I do, and I like that Jeff Gundy has challenged me to think about what, in fact, my soul might be like. I want to believe it is defiant, at least a little, and somewhere near a place that I am not supposed to go. The title poem of the collection closes:

We are in the earth already, and the earth in us.

Even from Defiance, nothing's more than half a world away.

Even in a quiet place like Defiance, Ohio, the world is always happening, with its bad weather, difficult memories, and violent battles. None of this is ever very far away. What can we do but pay mind to our own place without denying other places? Jeff Gundy's book offers a powerful meditation on life. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. We all matter. And defiance, in the end, is inevitably a part of the center.

