

Out of Silence. New and Selected Poems by John Harvey

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Review by Norbert Hirschhorn

A poet, an ex-publisher and a crime-writer walk into a bar -- and his name is John Harvey. I could populate several more such jokes with Harvey's personae: drummer, jazz lover, art aficionado and dramatist.

Out of Silence marks Harvey's return to formal poetry years after his two signature collections (*Ghosts of a Chance*, 1992, and *Bluer Than This*, 1998). His six new poems prove he has emerged from the stillness. It would be a pity if the new work turns out to be from a century plant (*Agave americana*), blooming once or twice in a lifetime, but the blossoms are nonetheless beautiful, worth the wait.

Harvey's tutelary spirits are Frank O'Hara of the walk-about 'lunch poems' (one new piece is "In imitation of Frank O'Hara"), Edward Hopper (think of 'Night Hawks', 'Early Sunday Morning', 'Hotel Room'), and jazz greats like Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Thelonius Monk (jazz pianist with a growl), and Chet Baker -- who all make an appearance in the poems. Listen to Chet Baker on trumpet doing 'Almost Blue' or 'My Funny Valentine', then re-read Harvey. You will hear Harvey's style, one that I call 'enfolding': sadness without bitterness, reminiscence without nostalgia, solace without irony -- feelings more poignant than those lost moments themselves when they were lived. If you don't leave someone, that someone will leave you. Harvey shares O'Hara's seemingly careless brilliance: an art that is seamless, disguising the craft.

'Style' is the key to Harvey's writing. How one says poetry is at least as important as what one says. Duke Ellington's famous aphorisms apply: 'It don't mean a thing if it don't got that swing', and 'If it sounds good, it is good.' Unlike the products from many of our lauded poets, Harvey's poems, even while plumbing the depths of feeling with unerring prosody, never pretend to be smarter than the reader. He writes the jazz of quotidian life -- which is little more than the naming of ordinary things, such as the way Ella Fitzgerald catalogues, 'These Foolish Things':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLbgNvjyS4I>. As Harvey writes,

C minor, F 7th, B flat --
nothing can be bluer than this.

(*Blue Monk*)

(Disclosure: I have been published by Harvey's Slow Dancer Press.)

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