

LISA STEINMAN'S POEMS SHOW A MIND IN MOTION

By Eleanor Berry

Sometimes a new book by a poet whose work I've admired for a long time will send me back to that poet's previous books. So it was with *Absence & Presence*, a collection of poems by Lisa Steinman, published last year.

Steinman is Kenan Professor of English and Humanities at Reed College, and she has published five earlier books of poetry as well as three books about other poets' work. After reading her new collection for the first time, I re-read two others—*A Book of Other Days*, published in 1993, and *Carslaw's Sequences*, published in 2003. Thus, I was able to immerse myself in Steinman's work from about three decades.

"The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." So the great 20th-century American poet Wallace Stevens famously described what he thought the modern era required its poets to write. Whenever I read Steinman's poetry, that succinct description comes to mind. *A Book of Other Days* has been described very similarly by poet Alice Fulton, who says that its poems, in both content and form, "enact the pleasures of thought in its sortings, ventures, and returns." The thinking that these poems convey is not the kind of thought that blocks out the world. It is fully engaged with the world and its everyday occurrences. And it is equally engaged with the words it uses—not only their meanings but their sounds, derivations, and associations.

In *A Book of Other Days*, every poem except the first starts with the word or phrase that ended the preceding poem. To read through the whole sequence of poems is to participate in the activity of a very lively mind as it moves through its days, each one picking up where the last one left off. Some of these days sound unpromising but turn out to be satisfyingly full. Thus, a poem called "Hum-Drum Days" ends with the lines, "You can hear the hum in hum-drum. / It's

all you needed to know.” But the very next poem, “Looking Forward to Looking Back,” remembers the youthful sense that “All we needed to know would come in a flash,” muses on the gradual discovery that “The revolution comes / and goes,” bringing no great revelations, and ends in disquiet: “From here there is no looking back, / and coming home is no great shakes.” The nature of home and the question of how to live a good life are preoccupations of this book from the early 1990s, and they carry over into the two more recent ones.

According to a note at the beginning of *Carslaw’s Sequences*, the title refers to “divergent series” studied by the mathematician Horatio Scott Carslaw—series that can’t be summed. It is a fitting title for this collection of poems where one thing after another impinges on the attention, and the mind tries to connect each new thing to all the rest, to make sense of the whole series of impressions—while acknowledging the impossibility of doing so. In “Double Rainbow,” for example, the speaker tries to take in everything around her in an airport waiting room and in the sky and air outside, only to realize, “There’s something missing here—a sense / of how these lives work, or do not; how the radio // touches dancer and drunken couple, but not both in the same way.”

In Steinman’s new book, *Absence & Presence*, the poems are mostly briefer—descriptive or narrative lyrics rather than meditations. They are still poems “of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice,” but they are articulations more of feeling than of thinking. Some, like “Thought Under Construction,” speak of the difficulty of thinking: “Voices growl at the edges / of mind, mind skittering away from thought, saying // (in a mother’s voice), ‘This will never do.’” The mind in these poems is often uneasy, troubled by awareness of aging and death, by a sense of loss. These mental states are wryly characterized as “Rainy Afternoons of the Soul.” In

the poem of that title, the speaker's attention turns from her reading to what she can see out the window:

... outside my study a humming
bird tries to drink from a red plastic mesh bag,

the kind that holds or used to hold fruit, the bird's
small beak thrusting into what contains only

air & is itself more emptiness than weave,
like a series of commas trying to splice fragments

of thought together.

Like the humming bird, these poems probe emptiness. They make something of it. To have emptiness so finely articulated is exhilarating. As the speaker comments in "Elegy with Policeman," "the consolation / of imaginary things is not imaginary // consolation."