

Judith Kitchen

an excerpt of

*Raindrops on Roses . . .**

. . . and whiskers on kittens . . . doorbells and sleighbells . . . girls in white dresses . . . silver-white winters that melt . . . —you really can't stand that tune, and it's probably because the tune carries the words, and the words just drive you crazy, going over and over in your mind like that. Not that you don't like raindrops on roses, but once those raindrops have been paired with those kittens they become so . . . well, the only word you can find for it is *twee*, and that's a word that defines itself by resisting definition—because your twee is someone else's bright copper kettle, and vice versa. Anyway, the tune drives you crazy carrying on all day in the back of the brain, and pretty soon, as a kind of antidote, you begin to think of your own favorite things, but then they, too, instantly fall prey to the all-too-familiar: your grandson's bright hair in the sunlight, the nutmeggy smell of pumpkin pie baking, a blue glass goblet on your windowsill, one of the three tenors, your twenty-nine-cent Elvis Presley stamp, your ten-cent Robert Frost stamp, and, right now, the amazing snowdrift of cherry blossoms right at eye level across the street from where you sit wishing you could forget that song.

What's not to like about wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings? Nothing. Nothing at all. In fact, the line's rather gorgeous; rhythmically, it rivals Hopkins' "Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet." Well, maybe not when you couple the

*With apologies to W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Jean Cocteau, Samuel Johnson, and Archibald MacLeish, for what I've done with their definitions of poetry.

An essay-review of

THE KITCHEN SINK: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, 1972–2007. By Albert Goldbarth. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2007. 345 pp. \$26.00.

QUIVER OF ARROWS: SELECTED POEMS, 1986–2006. By Carl Phillips. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 207 pp. \$20.00, paper.

EARTHLY MEDITATIONS: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS. By Robert Wrigley. New York: Penguin, 2006. 177 pp. \$20.00, paper.

DEEP LIGHT: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, 1987–2007. By Rebecca McClanahan. Oak Ridge, TN: Iris Press, 2007. 189 pp. \$26.00, paper.

THE CORPSE FLOWER: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS. By Bruce Beasley. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007. 197 pp. \$35.00. \$18.95, paper.

CROSSING TO SUNLIGHT REVISITED: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS. By Paul Zimmer. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 93 pp. \$18.95, paper.

RECOUNTING THE SEASONS: POEMS, 1958–2005. By John Engels. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. 604 pp. \$55.00.

latter with “This darksome burn, horseback brown” and Hopkins’ ability to “spring” his rhythms into something that transcends mere song. Those geese, combined with a bevy of simpering girls in blue-satin sashes, lose their gravity and take on an aura of sentimentality.

So now you start a list of what you don’t like, over and above not liking that tune, persistent now, whirling noisily in your head. The problem with “favorite” is that it doesn’t really have an antonym—and if it did, maybe its opposite would not be quite what you need. After all, pure loathing is not what you’re after, but things that—simply because you don’t really like them all that much—help to define your character or sensibility just as much as the things you want to savor. Even your negatives make a list that sounds all too much like a song: gum on the sidewalk and Muzak with dinner, letters that say that you aren’t quite the winner, long-distance walks from the car to the mall, these are the things that you don’t like at all.

All this riffing, just so I can ponder the process of selecting poems for a Selected. By the time poets are contemplating a Selected, they know you probably either like their work or don’t. So, do they merely hand us a list of their favorite things, or do they consider more than their versions of schnitzel with noodles, sifting past work for evidence of a poetic trajectory or life span, so to speak? Maybe they want to chronicle the evolution of their craft, or highlight the consistency of their themes, or call attention to a dramatic shift in outlook. Even though the tasks they’ve set themselves might look similar—define your poetic self by selecting a compact, comprehensive look at the whole from among the poems of your first five, six, or seven books, your last twenty or twenty-five-plus years—it’s interesting to note how differently diverse poets go about tying the strings of their particular brown paper packages.