

Ask Again

George Johnston

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Review by Stephen Morrissey

Some of the most impressive poetry in George Johnston's *Ask Again* are the occasional poems in the first section of the book. Johnston brings to these poems, as he does to all of his poetry, an emphasis on the form and craft of making a poem, and a melancholy awareness of life's finiteness that makes his statement humble and loving.

The occasional poems in *Ask Again* not only mark a significant event, but at their best give the reader a sudden perception of the impermanence of life. For instance, in his poem on his own retirement from teaching at Carleton University, the poet begins by asking:

Knowing what I now know
would I have consented
to be born? Next question.
When it comes time to go
will I go forlorn or
contented? Ask again.
Anything in between
should be easier.

* * * *

What was my kind of work?
Presumably teaching,
whatever that may be.
Teaching is a kind of
learning, much like loving

In "Convocation Address" he writes,

Now what do I know?
Not much about me,
by what right lucky
and fearful-happy;
not much about us,
learned and perplexed;
nothing about what next.
Otherwise enough
to get on with.
I know that I learned;
do not know that I taught—

maybe, maybe not.

These are not all poems that commemorate events in the academic life; “Fin de Tour” was written at the end of a European poetry reading tour with Susan Musgrave and Bill Bissett; in “Fred’s Sixty-fifth Birthday”, he writes of Fred Elliott, the beekeeper and farmer, who appeared in Johnston’s early poem “Honey”. Subsequent sections of the book deal with “Marriages, Births, Deaths”, and “Seasons and Meters”.

“Marriages, Births, Deaths” is a celebration of family life. In it Johnston writes of the marriages of his children, the births of grandchildren, and the deaths of more distant family members. In “Laura’s Funeral” he writes:

Much gets remembered: the good
she did; how she did it,
as though, What else but do good?
Small things too, the tilt
of her gait and smile,
a way she had of turning up
without warning.
That was her way of going.

The last sentence gives us pause to reflect, to see deeper into the subject of the poem, and to feel some of the sadness the poet experienced. It is the faithfulness to craft and discipline of writing that is consistent in Johnston’s writing. Every word is there for a purpose, no word detracts from the cumulative effect of the poem. “Lesson One” returns us to Fred Elliott and the discipline of beekeeping. But beekeeping is only the subject matter that allows Johnston to write of deeper things. Again the craft involved in writing the poem is evident: most lines contain only six syllables, but the syllable-count is so subtly done that the reader is not at all aware of it. Johnston writes:

Lesson one, a hard one:
go gently; likewise get
proper gloves; likewise let
not your hand be hurried
by numbers in the world.

Some of the poems in *Ask Again* clearly exhibit Johnston’s deliberate use of form and meter. Consider the following poem, “Ecstatic”:

When basswood blows bees make in it,
mill in midsummer myriad pillage;
probing to pull out pollen and sweetness
they swing sure-foot searching of mouth.
A massive murmur moves through the basswood
and breathes blissful her bosom kiss.
Caressed queen she crowns the season

her senses swarming in shared ferment.

In an essay, "What Do the Scalds Tell Us?", published in the fall 1982 issue of the University of Toronto Quarterly, Johnston writes that this poem "exhibits *aoalhending* (full rhymes) and *skothending* (half-rhymes) as well as alliteration and the Germanic pattern of paired half-lines. A secondary alliterative scheme joins each pair of half-lines to the final stressed syllable of the pair preceding." The emphasis on form in the above poem is the exception in *Ask Again*; it is Johnston's contention, and one that is valid at least for himself, "that an established form is not restrictive but, on the contrary, full of variety."

Throughout *Ask Again* the importance of form, usually one devised by the poet for a particular poem, is evident. For instance, in "A Marriage Poem for Nora and Jamie", each alternating line contains a word that rhymes with the names Nora and Jamie. Other poems are acrostics, for instance "Elegy (for George Whalley)", "Seamus Acrostic", "A Return (for George Bowering)", etc.; still other poems follow a strict syllable count. All of this gives the reader a surprise when he discovers either a hidden meaning in the poem or a greater depth of meaning when the form becomes more obvious after several readings. This emphasis on craft might be dull and monotonous in the hands of a lesser poet; in George Johnston's hands, the care and love evident in the making of these poems adds to the vision and depth of his work.

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