

*Morbidity & Ornament*

by Steve Noyes

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Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Former editor-in-chief of *Prism* magazine, Steve Noyes, who once lived in Winnipeg, published his first book, *Backing into Heaven*, with Turnstone Press. No less than Al Purdy said of it: “In a sober and carefully understated voice I say: this is a damn good poet.” Noyes has steamrolled along since then, with *Morbidity & Ornament* being his sixth volume of poetry. He has recently added a novel, *It Is Just That Your House Is So Far Away* (Signature Editions, 2009), to his arsenal. Describing the poems in *Morbidity*, he said that he set out to write forty-four poems as different as possible. He has succeeded.

Noyes has lived in China, where he worked and travelled extensively, and he holds an International Mandarin Proficiency Certificate, so it is no wonder that each section in this collection opens with a poem he wrote in Chinese, then rendered in pinyin before translating it into English. It is interesting to examine the Chinese, as each consists of four lines with each line having the same number of logograms, creating a block-like appearance. One can see a similarity to the Japanese haiku form. The first such poem reads, in its English translation:

Tombs arranged on sloping ground  
Blue sea soft clouds dreamy afternoon  
Wet rocks whispered happiness  
– The dead could see your heart. (11)

The second line, because of the lack of punctuation, blurs dimensions and creates a surreal landscape. All that’s missing is melting watches. The march of syllables in the third line creates the sound of waves. Notice how “whispered happiness” reverses the order of “s” and “p.”

In “Daughter, Planetarium” Noyes creates an interesting metaphor, where the daughter’s cell phone is the key to the universe:

. . . The screen pulses the emissions  
Of fractal cosmic actors, and my daughter holds  
My hand, to drag me yet a ways forward  
Towards the serpents argent in the plumes  
Of sea storms, at the far quadrants of the known,  
Towards the static from the stars. (18)

The one difficulty I have with this poem, and it is a minor one, is the use of capitalization for the first word in each line.

One of the most unusual of poems in this collection is “An Introduction to Chaucer.” Noyes wrote this in honour of a professor at Brandon University whose course on Chaucer Noyes took one semester.

In the Tabard, nigh the martyr's tomb, he rilled along.  
Then one day, he fell ill, and an associate marched in  
With a reel-to-reel, his tie snagged in the spool  
Of Grant's voice giving lectures from intensive care, (25)

We are left to wonder whether it was the professorial dedication or the content that impressed Noyes more.

I was once told that Brandon had more millionaires per capita than any other city in Canada. I have never checked into the veracity of that statement. But, for some reason, Brandon must have made quite an impression on Noyes, as he has dedicated another poem, "Poutine with Comet," to this city:

Passing snowbanks gleaming on the shoulder  
In *the dead of night* just East  
Of Brandon, dark tower of the Perogy Palace  
Sing my beacon, and beyond the wide spray  
Of mercury-vapor light above the Husky, (37)

Anyone who has driven that stretch of the Trans-Canada knows well what Noyes describes here. I'm surprised he hasn't included the Red Oak Inn.

A.F. Moritz, when he was a guest on my radio program *Speaking of Poets*, spoke of the two different directions a stanza could take. The more familiar is the one that reads like prose paragraphs, each following on and extending the thought of the preceding. Then there is the one that associates disparate pieces of information into one poem. Noyes employs the latter technique in "Catherine's Eyes," which takes us from the individuals who drew shapes on cave walls through the Crusades to a woman in repose. Here's a quotation from the poem:

A woman breathing  
in the moment before sleep:  
her pleasure  
in that retinal surrender  
of awareness in the darkness  
is the world. (54)

This meditation on tenderness, on the awe of the person sleeping beside you, rivals Neruda.

It would be surprising if Noyes had not included at least one poem with a middle-Eastern theme, as he has converted to Islam. Thus, we have "A Poem for Ramadan":

After cups of cardamom-laced coffee,  
and medjool dates, we said farewell,  
for the festival had bled into evening.  
Amal, and her friend Amal,  
led me down the spiral staircase. (63)

The exquisite third line, "for the festival had bled into evening," captures a reverence for the major event in the Islamic calendar.

The section "Thought I Saw a Wolf" contains poems both supportive and critical of China and the way lives are lived there. One such is "Canzone for Foreign Experts":

. . . I've also heard  
China has banned plastic bags; a crinkly flock is heard  
Snapping past, snagging on branches, in full flight  
From their prohibition. (83)

Does the plastic bag represent the Chinese peasant who escapes the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government in the manner that W. Somerset Maugham recommended in his *Of Human Bondage*?: "Follow your inclinations with due regard to the policeman round the corner."

And on that note, we shall bid adieu to Noyes as we drift off to dream of painting cave walls and of plastic bags as flocks of birds. ♫

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the U.S. for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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