

*Carl Little*

## Griefs And Grievances

*The Floating Candles* by Sydney Lea.  
University of Illinois Press, 1982, 104 pp.

In his introduction to E.A. Robinson's book *King Jasper* (1935), Robert Frost speaks of the need to distinguish between griefs and grievances. In a tongue-in-check manner he acknowledges the latter's usefulness, at the same time taking a dig at the U.S.S.R.: "I read in a sort of Sunday-school leaflet from Moscow, that the grievances of Chekhov against the sordidness and dullness of his home-town society have done away with the sordidness and dullness of home-town society all over Russia." Albeit a qualified plug, the statement still allows for one possible positive result of grievances: change, be it material, social, spiritual, or otherwise.

Frost is more seriously in doubt when it comes to the appropriateness of expressing such grievances in poetry. In this context he wholeheartedly sides with the griefs and grievors of this world for, according to the poet, they incorporate a certain patience and have an inherent depth not found in grievances. Furthermore, Frost would aver, poetry is grief's stomping ground:

What I like is griefs and I like them Robinsonianly profound. I suppose there is no use in asking, but I should think we might be indulged to the extent of having grievances restricted to prose if prose will accept the imposition, and leaving poetry free to go its ways in tears.

In his own polite sly manner Frost has delineated the age-old dilemma of the poet (and artist in general): shall I or can I ignore the issues of my day in favor of a more nonpartisan, even private, aesthetic? Many poets, including Frost, have at times followed the political path, but the resulting work is often, but not always for good reason, given little notice. For example, Wordsworth's paean to the French Revolution in "The Prelude" is passed over by many an English professor in favor of the passages of childhood reverie. Auden's "Spain" suffers similar inat-

tention, the purely lyric side of his oeuvre garnering the praise.

Arguably this desire on the writer's part to take on the present, to list his or her grievances, has increased in the last 30 or so years. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1949 William Faulkner took note of this shift in priorities: "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" Today writers like Adrienne Rich and Nadine Gordimer have proven that craft and conscience need not be mutually exclusive. The women's movement, apartheid, and the proliferation of nuclear arms are only a few issues that provide the impetus and backbone for art in all its manifestations.

In his second book of poems, *The Floating Candles*, Sydney Lea is also speaking his griefs and grievances, in poetry constructed with the care of a master carpenter. Yet Lea, like Frost, finally sides with grief, a grief that is at once personal yet capable of great breadth and versatility. Indeed a multivalent and human sorrow lies behind Lea's most powerful poems and paradoxically turns out to be the source of his and the reader's solace.

Lea's very fine first book of poems, *Searching the Drowned Man* (University of Illinois, 1980), ended with "Elegy at Peter Dana Point," a poignant lament for a friend, Creston MacArthur, that is a technical tour de force. The following lines from this elegy is a good example of Lea's narrative expertise; this particular citation also contains that recognition of humor that Frost claimed was essential to true grieving:

All your mourners know what they're weeping for

in the gaps of this mud-and-thunder roar;

but a few stand out, like beaver huts:

Lola and Leo, and old Earl, grim

as always, who called you "Gus";

and straight as a string your Uncle Jim,

with his strawberry nose, and full of rye;

"Three-Dollar" Bill, who blinks his eyes

like an owl; and down from Milltown, half-breed Dave,

the one you called "The Blue-Eyed Brave,"

who called you "Warden's Nightmare."

It would not be wrong to say that the spirit of Robert Service, poet laureate of the Canadian Northwest, hovers over this colorful catalogue of lookers-on. As with Service, Lea has lifted this funeral out of the realm of the ordinary, thereby paying special tribute to the lost.

In turn Lea's *The Floating Candles* opens with an elegy, the bitter

"Dirge for my Brother: Dawn to Dawn." Here the poet attempts to minimize the benefits of his lamentation: "So little/comes, so little to listen for or see/in elegy." In fact, as Lea explains in a later poem, the dominant elegiac tone of this book derives from circumstances beyond his control:

The still  
photos on my study sill make  
a male morgue: that's just  
how it's fallen out, dead father,  
brother, teachers,  
friends — all men.  
(*"Dead of Winter, Echo, Daughter"*)

In "Dirge for my Brother" the reader is witness to grief still fresh, untempered by time or analysis. The distancing that permitted the flowing transitions and finely executed rhymes of "Elegy at Peter Dana Point" proves inadequate for handling a brother's recent death. Instead the rhythm is rushed, the verses sometimes staccato, the syntax reflecting the grief (contrary to the traditional dirge's slow and solemn pacing). As in Galway Kinnell's "Freedom, New Hampshire," also an elegy for a brother, Lea has chosen incidents from a shared childhood to make piquant his loss:

I save some pictures of you, downtown. In one,  
your banner

fairly screams for THE END OF DISCRIMINATION  
NOW! In another, you carry "Cherokee,"  
that runaway on Chestnut Street, to drop her  
at a preacher friend's: "Father, the girl's fourteen!"  
Your mind could detect the rustle of city vultures  
who'd swoop at her, but not — the preacher chuckles —  
how her Jersey parents would wail when they discovered  
their vagabond nestling nesting with Reverend Nigger.

There is, however, a privacy of detail found at certain moments in this poem that bars a reader's full appreciation of the suffering. But it is the experience of just such a raw grief that can leave the most articulate person hard-pressed to find a means of expressing it.

These means Lea finds and uses to outstanding effect in the well chosen title poem, "The Floating Candles," also dedicated to his late

brother. The poem is an exquisitely visual description of two boys' summer ritual of setting lit candle stubs afloat in cups on a creek-fed pond:

The night brought on  
a small breeze to clear  
the day that all day  
had oppressed us, to dry  
the sweat that our purposeful  
hour had made,  
to spread the glims  
like dreamboats of glory  
in invisible current.

As is the case with the majority of Lea's work the attention to detail here is meticulous and tangible. At the same time the poem exemplifies the Romantics' credo: the poet should use landscape to reinforce and augment both the emotional and moral content of a human event. Thus this precisely drawn scene can open out in the end to a wider judgement of life, past and present:

It showed us the way  
the splendid can flare  
despite the flow  
of the common. Now,  
despite the persistence  
of heat and quarrel,  
the thickness of wives  
and children and time,  
such shinings on water  
are fact. Or sublime.

Of the English Romantic poets it is with Wordsworth that Lea most shares a world view, particularly his rendering of those "recollected hours that have the charm/Of visionary things" ("The Prelude"). Moreover, he emulates at times that poet's wish to "imitate, and as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men" (Preface, 1800). Lea's major contribution to this tradition is "The Feud," a page-turner of a poem, 101 stanzas long, which rivals, if not surpasses, the best narrative poems of recent vintage. This monologue is spoken by a farmer who has become involved in a series of half-real, half-imaginary "eye-for-an-eye" incidents with a neighboring inbred clan, the Walkers. The following



lines hardly do justice to what is the centerpiece of *The Floating Candles*; hopefully they will give some idea of the stanzaic fluidity and expertly handled pentameter line:

They say there's nothing in it, but as God  
will witness me, a full moon fills my head,  
asleep or not, with every bad idea.

One spring, the moon that big, a skunk came calling

in the shed, and my fool tomcat gave a rush.

The smell was worse than death. It woke me up,  
if I was sleeping (I'd been trying to),  
and till the dawn arrived, for hours I felt

the stink was like a judgment: every sin  
from when I was a child till then flew back  
and played itself again before my eyes.

It should be mentioned that as editor of the *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly* Lea sponsors an annual narrative poem contest; "The Feud" is more than proof that he practices what he preaches.

The second section of the book, "Ghost Signs, Seasons, Earth and Air" (in three parts), is an ambitious sequence of about 20 lyrics of differing lengths and varied voice and technique. Subtitled "Reflections on the Hunt" this collection revolves around the friends and relatives (and animals) with whom the author has hunted, and what they, through the hunt, have taught him. There are echos here of Robert Penn Warren and Faulkner (especially *The Bear*), but they only serve to add resonance to what is already a clearly individual voice.

The section's dedicatory poem (a recasting of the moving "For My Father, Who Hunted" found in Lea's first book) acts as the key signature, setting the elegiac tone for the poems that follow. But the wide-ranging nature of this section also gives Frost's useful but not wholeheartedly endorsed grievances the opportunity to show themselves. They are mainly aimed at what Lea calls "the new-age mountain farmer," that recent arrival to New England who bears in one hand a dung-fork and in the other a stack of no-hunting signs, and then has the gall, in Lea's opinion, to call himself a farmer. Unfortunately these gentlemen cultivators are easy targets (like tourists), and show what a thin line lies between grievance and editorial. On the other hand, the repeated jabs at these infringers seem to arise out of the grief Lea experiences as a witness to the passing of a way of life that helped to nurture him.

This is not to say that the section is any kind of a manifesto in unreserved praise of the hunt. On the contrary, hunting's darker, less appealing side is given its full expression, especially in the second part entitled "Toward Silhouette: Some Seasons." A good example of Lea's ambiguous feelings is found in its opening poem, "Crow-Killing in the Eisenhower Years. Fourth Month (1953)." There a senseless though youthful patriotism drives two boys to shoot down crows transformed by imagination into "commies and chinks." Frustrated by the wariness of these scavenger birds the boys rig up a stuffed hawk as bait:

Wings spread, he was fierce  
in death, and noble  
as the mother country's  
unflappable eagle,  
and we made progress  
at last! Battalions  
of crows — gone crazy  
to strafe him — blackened  
the sky, or clung  
— strange ebony apples —  
to our shelter trees.

Commandos! We beat back the dark enemies.

In the above 12 lines one finds so many instances of a perfecting hand, from the echoing "noble" and "eagle," to the eerie metamorphosis of crows into apples. Even the exclamation point — a punctuation mark not usually encouraged in poetry — is deftly placed, twice, to emphasize that youthful zeal for make believe.

While the end of a book is often the resting place for weaker poems, Lea finishes his *Candles* with some of the strongest writing in the volume. Particularly praiseworthy are "Sin and Fear," "Toward Silhouette," "Bellatrix Visible" and the concluding poem, "The New Year: 1980." This last begins with a roll call of the mentors and friends with whom the reader has become familiar over the course of the book. We, too, come to understand and appreciate what Lea calls "the aptitude of names." So it is with his list of the "old places," each capable of evoking an entire tale:

... The Hedgehog Den, The Lake  
of One Mistake, Slewgundy Ridge, Hardscrabble,  
Quintown, Eagle,  
Sweet Marie Cove, The Thousand-Acre Burn,  
Camilla's Heartbreak.

The poem and the book end on an image of transcendence; and though the poet recognizes the transitoriness of his experience, he also acknowledges its presence, celebrates it in fact, using language and imagery that recall the visionary moments in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.

Moon and stars and planets fall into frost on  
 branch and brush  
 that wink in the influence, every node of light  
 a name or face  
 or place that's lit like a bird. For a moment I know  
 what the saved must feel,  
 as I whistle my dogs up, kick uphill,  
 through the light of heavenly fields.

*The Floating Candles* is every bit a successful book of poems and, what is even more uncommon these days, a successful *second* book of poems. It is, in some ways, less careful than his first in that Lea is more willing to take risks in technique and theme, to experiment. There is also a welcome leaning towards the narrative, which could quite naturally evolve into short stories or a novel.

Lea's forte, however, continues to be the lyric, among his best in this collection: "At Hardscrabble, Face to the Moon," "Bernie's Quick-Shave (1968)," "The One White Face in the Place" and "Battle." Based on George Bellows's painting of boxers "Both Members of the Club," "Battle" is dedicated to "the satisfied lookers-on" and seems particularly timely in light of the recent rash of deaths in the ring. With the final lines, four simple declarative sentences, Lea takes us, the safe and unscathed spectators, to task, his grievance expressed with an ironic cutting twist:

This isn't that rose gore of old Romance.  
 The loser's eyes turn inward to the blackness.  
 The winner's eyes turn upward to the blackness.  
 We look, and say, The Battle is a dance.

It was this same George Bellows who stated that the artist is he who "makes life more interesting or beautiful, more understandable or mysterious, or probably, in the best sense, more wonderful." Sydney Lea has once again proven himself worthy of this description. We can only await with impatience the next step in what is an increasingly impressive poetic oeuvre.