Clare Rossini

Review of Mark Jarman. *The Black Riviera.*

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In "The Story Hour," a poem in Mark Jarman's most recent book, *The Black Riviera*, the poet recalls lying in bed as a child, listening to his parents socializing with their friends. These "fabulists, the gathered tribe / Of the living room" are telling stories to one another, and the child hears snatches of them, stories "full of lacunae," through the plaster wall. As so often occurs in Jarman's poetry, the given narrative subtly alludes to another: the child's sense of distance from his parents. "The story hour," after all, is that homey interlude between supper and bedtime when parents read books to their children, but here, the child has been put to bed early so that the parents may entertain. The child's desire to hear his parents' stories, to experience the magic and consolation of narrative, is ultimately a fertile longing, however; out of it comes the poet's conception of life and art:

> I believe there is a secret to life
> Because my earliest memories are
> Of hearing secrets muffled by a wall,
> Coming to me in pieces like dust
> Sliding down a shaft of sunlight.
> Only these came in darkness
> And sparked and fused and radiated
> Half-truths I made whole.

The simplicity and straightforward ease of these lines are typical of Jarman. Here, as elsewhere in the book, he shifts with admirable grace from the observed details of experience — the secrets "muffled by a wall" — to the gained insight, so that one sort of poetic information grows naturally from the other. The poet's sense of life as a "secret," a half-understood fragment, compels him to make the "whole" that a poem

can provide. As "The Story Hour" suggests, in *The Black Riviera* Jarman will seek that healing "whole" through narrative.

Many of the poems in the book are long, lushly-detailed, and highly inventive in their exploration of narrative strategies; Jarman experiments with stories within stories, stories within memories, character studies, first- and third-person narratives. "Good Friday" is an example of Jarman's interest in expanding the parameters of narrative structure. This poem begins with the event commemorated by Christians on Good Friday, the crucifixion of Christ; it goes on to meditate on the death in youth of one of the poet's friends, then returns to the gospel story; it ends finally not with the gospel story of resurrection but with a personal image of continuity as the poet walks with his daughters, picking flowers. (The relationship between parents and their children is a subplot which runs through many of these poems, and appropriately so; the ur-narrative for most of us is provided by family life.) "Good Friday" succeeds because of its narrative generosity, its accommodation of religious, personal, and familial myth. The poem opens out to its final image of the poet's daughter, blowing away the spores of a dying dandelion:

> Yes, it is complex, I know.
> Look at the articulation of the seed itself,
> The filament erect to its parachute
> Of down hairs. How easily
> It could be taken as almost cruciform,
> How willingly the wind could explicate it:
> His breath, his sign. But it is ours,
> As we show her how to force the air
> Out in a rush, our love she takes as her own.

These lines resonate back through the poem, subtly informing the deaths meditated on earlier, contextualizing them in this image of final release.

The power of lived experience is felt throughout "Good Friday," and in fact, the most compelling of the narrative poems are those which are spoken in the first person. Jarman's "I" has a natural authority that organizes and orients the details of his stories. Thus the impact of poems such as "Between Flights" or "Testimony and Postscript," both strongly narrative pieces that crystallize around that voice.

The Black Riviera is not composed solely of poems that tell stories, but it provides other sorts of pleasures. Short, crisp lyrics like "The Children" and "Awakened by Sea Lions" exhibit the formal and tonal mastery that we've come to expect from the author of *North Sea, The*

Rote Walker, and *Far and Away*. And the poems of memory — "Days of '74," for example, and the book's title poem — are classic Jarman, if we can apply that phrase to the work of a young poet. Their elegiac tone has an edge and pungency that knocks the soft-focus out; we get sentiment, well-earned, but no sentimentality. Nonetheless, it is story-making that this book is about, the truths that arrive not all at once but that unravel slowly, in time. As Jarman says in "Story Hour," these are truths that

> Begin where the human is a voice
> And the voice a story and the story
> An episode and the episode
> A sandman's powder of mumbling and sighs.

These lines speak of the magical power of narratives, the fictions that, like sleep, lead us into the remotest parts of ourselves. If these poems indicate what Jarman can do with that power, we can only hope that he will continue to provide readers with his versions of this most ancient and necessary of literary forms.