



# living with what remains:

A REVIEW & COMMENTARY

By Eric Miller (2/4/05)

Judith Dupree's book of poetry, *living with what remains*, is composed of three parts: "All That Breathes," "All You Haven't Lost," and "Living With What Remains"—each approximately of equal parts, which gives a balanced "weight" to the volume.

The metaphysical note of her poetry is already struck in the first poem, "What I See," and it tells us, at the outset, that the poet is an experienced person who has endured the trials and tribulations of life:

Here is what I see.  
Here is what I have waited for,  
slogging through the years  
with eyes half shut  
against the glare.

While the poetry is often strongly metaphysical that does not mean she deals in vague and imprecise images and moods. The quality of her experience is very "real," indeed, very physical and precise. The second stanza of the opening poem makes this clear:

Here, a portion of eternity  
is unrolled before me,  
laid like an endless swatch  
of sod  
upon the grit and mud and tarmac  
At my feet.

But the physicality of the “grit” and “mud” and “tarmac” of her experiences of eternal reality consist of more than just these physical kinds of elements for her poems also contain a fullness of descriptive beauty, despite the sobering reality of many of her images:

Here, a lavishness of beauty  
is brushed across the broken cities,  
down the hollowed hills,  
deep beneath  
the dark and turgid waters.

In the final stanza of the opening poem, she boldly proclaims her vision, even the right to her vision. Her truth, her vision, she tells us, has a transcendental reality to it which, somehow, makes it more real than so-called reality itself. Indeed, in some respects her vision is, nonetheless, the opposite or “inversion” of an other-worldly kind of insubstantiality so often associated with the transcendental:

Here is the truth, I tell you—  
a winged visitation,  
an inversion of invisibility,  
as if I had entered  
a mirage and found that it alone  
was real.

That her poetic sensibilities are grounded in a quiet religiosity becomes even more apparent in her following poem which again deals with an “other worldly” passage:

You who do not remember passage  
from the other world,  
go back. It will open to your whisper.

You are a memory still burnished there—  
the way a tree stands back-lit

by the sun

or a thread of cloud glows purely  
in the afterlight.

To understand this “passage/from the other world” the poet admonishes us to “go back” and assures us that we will find that special pre-existence of ourselves still resident there where we are a “memory still burnished there”—highlighted, in fact, in just the way a tree is “back-lit” by the sun, or a thread of cloud that “glows purely/in the afterlight.”

In order to comply with this entreaty to “go back,” to return to a primal or pre-existent state, we must get in touch with that which is not composed of those elements from which we derive our substantive sense of self—in other words, our memories. We are told to go back:

Go back behind the memories  
that brought you here—  
beyond the taste of dirt,

before the earth turned upside down,  
before your soul escaped,  
before it fell.

We need to go “behind the memories,” beyond, it would seem, that “portion of reality” of which she speaks in the opening poem, or at least that portion which was laid before her as “sod” or “dirt” “mud” or “tarmac.” The poet seems to be saying that though the physical anchors of memory have their place in that portion of reality that we all know (i.e., the physical “things” of this world), to get to the essence of

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existence we must go beyond or rather “behind” those images and experiences to realize our essential selves. Indeed, we must go behind the time before “the earth turned upside down,” before our souls

“escaped/before it fell.” Here, it would seem, the poet is summoning up the time before the original catastrophe, before chaos ensued, before the primal fall of man. Indeed, this appears to be something very akin to what the poet means for the concluding lines of the poem invoke the time of the expulsion from Eden as that primal time before the great catastrophe:

Before the grace of Eden  
Dried to shibboleths.

The grace of Eden, is that time of primal awareness, the awareness *behind* that existence manifest in the world of earthly tangibility—the world of memory of mud and dirt, of broken cities, hollowed hills and dark and turgid waters. The time of transcendence is—it seems the poet is telling us—not a *new* state to achieve in the future, but it is a state to *recapture* from the past, from our original being, “before the grace of Eden/dried to shibboleths.” Before, in other words, the state of grace became a grace by proxy, by catch phrases, catechism, or conventional reference.

The first two poems of the volume set the metaphysical stage, so to speak, of the poet's grounding, and provide a focus of perspective from which the other poems flow. The first section of the volume proceeds with a series of poems on the theme of “*all that breathes.*” The following poems are increasingly less abstract and abound in sharp, clear, images painting lovely pictures as well as poignant and pithy comments. While the dominance of the religious prefigurement of God is repeatedly stated throughout the book, it is done so simply and matter-of-factly so that one does not have so much the feeling that we

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are dealing with religious poems, per se, but rather poems where the religious element is integral to the movement of the lines.

The third poem in the first section, "All That Is" opens with vivid imagery:

The heavens bend,  
full and generous above us,  
earth circling on its tether as it  
ever has, while we in this small  
garden unfold our petalled  
souls and fall in silent drifts.

Certainly heaven is "full and generous" and certainly our allotted plot, be it our own ground-of-being or that of the whole earth is "a small garden" compared to the heavens above us. And certainly, each of us, indeed, the whole race of us, "unfold our pettalled/souls and fall in silent drifts."

"All That Is" is a wonderfully modest poem, full of rich imagery (e.g., "lizards flit across the crusty rocks/like unconnected shadows") and the quiet music of well shaped lines.

"All That Is"—certainly, a "large" title, *all* that is—one that would appear to make great promises. And the poet *delivers* beautifully with a simple, heart-felt poem. Again it has a "religious" flavor (doesn't all good poetry, in its way, have a "religious" flavor?) especially as evinced in the final stanza:

and I stand, wondering,  
still wondering at all that is, and was –  
the endless circle of our being,

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and the endless fire of it—  
the brevity and grand bravura  
of His Flame within us.

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But here the invocation of the Deity does not express a dogma of useless ritual phrases but a living sense of the inwardness of the truly religious experience, indeed the essence of the divine breath within which is the flame of life itself, with all its “brevity and grand bravura.” Simple images which abound with such lucid brevity, lead to the concluding stanza, the stanza which sets the scene not only for the conclusion, but for the intentionality, of the whole poem:

Here, the starlings circle,  
orbiting the sun, gleaning over  
close-cropped fields,  
and eagles waver, sky-born,  
riding August's heated air;  
lizards flit across the crusty rocks  
like unconnected shadows  
while we are born and buried

“Born and buried” though we be, we are given the faculty of appreciating our personal sense of mortality (even our sense of immortality) which literally sings its affirmation in sound and imagery:

And I stand, now,  
beneath this arching universe—  
to hear the trees sing soft Te Deum,  
to memorize the moon  
caught briefly in its nest of clouds;

The next poem, “Sunrise” makes the earlier point that the poems in the first section become increasingly palpable as the section continues. The

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Deity is mentioned, to be sure, three times, in fact, but in such a matter-of-fact manner that it doesn't feel at all like a foisting of a the poet's religious theological convictions on the reader but as a natural expression of the poems integral perspective:

The morning is a womb,  
a shaped silence,  
like the way He places things  
invisible around us.

Not a muffling. No the air  
is free of cloy and ripe with clarity—  
and of sage come into bloom.

God has stirred the bush ahead;  
it burns with early light.  
and lo, His fingerprint is pressed  
against the oak;  
a squirrel deciphers it too quickly  
for my dull eye.

As can be seen, the reference to the Deity is much like Joyce Kilmer's simple expression that "but only God can make a tree." The rest of the poem does not *mention* God again, but it is clear that the Creator lies behind all acts of nature, behind all created *things* and is a presence manifest, unspoken, in the remaining lines:

The grasses unbend, drink up  
their meager draught,  
plump their veins against the sun—  
knowing every shadow of its fierce ascent,  
the lap of its hot tongue.

But for now the sky is cool

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to a solemn sweetness, and unfolds  
like a great wing spreading,  
like the infinite shape of the soul  
in its final rising.

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Like many of the poems in the collection, "Sunrise" plays off many associations, both physical and metaphysical. The conceit that the sky "unfolds/like a great wing spreading/like the infinite shape of the soul/in its final rising" gives a palpable sense to the phrase "infinite shape of the soul"—though "infinite" and "soul" are words that ordinarily do not convey a "physical sense,"—indeed, they are among the most abstract of all words. But, the subtle mixing of the images that are sensory (such as "cool," and "cloy" "unfolds," "spreading," and "rising") forms a picture in mind, as the title suggests us to, of a magnificent sunrise.

Clearly nature images dominate and enrich the poets arsenal and over and again, such as in the next poem "Epiphany," we are presented images of the sky, and clouds, and of the sun presenting a "picture" of the miraculous. "Epiphany" commands us, in its one word first line, to register the physical and metaphysical heaven that highlights that "lavishness of beauty" that the poet referred to in the opening poem:

Watch. . .  
the way clouds pass the light  
between them, tossing it, spilling more  
than they can gather up.

Something happens to the sky  
this time each morning.  
Doors open up, out there.  
Oh, we never see them—never know  
they're there at all  
unless the clouds carve sudden frames



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that draw our eyes to focus.

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Yes, indeed, “something happens to the sky” when morning happens and “Doors open up, out there.” These doors are the portals of heaven

through which illimitable light pours out of the “sudden frames” that the clouds make and “draw eyes to focus.” Whether we can see the phenomenon or not the process abides, we are told (“Oh, we never see them—never know/they’re there at all), unless the framing clouds provide a focus for the vision. The lines of the poem itself carve out these “sudden frames” by framing the phenomenon with simple words artfully arranged.

Another poem, “And He Turns,” even more overtly “religious” shows the unique and compelling way that the poet handles the theistic content of her poems by coupling it with intensely personal humanization:

God looks over His shoulder,  
and He sees us in our waiting,  
sees us hem-and-hawing, standing there,  
needing Him, not wanting to disturb Him.

And right away we are confronted, not only with the poets personalizing of the Divine, the anthropomorphizing of the Deity, but with one of our own deeply personal experiences. Reading the poem this writer thought, yes, isn't that true, how often I felt the somewhat ridiculous situation of “hem-and-hawing” before the Divine in my prayers, “not wanting to disturb Him.” As if one could actually disturb the Deity! How I, too, and no doubt many of us, have felt that exact feeling. With all the world in flame, and needs and sufferings galore, how dare I ask to interrupt the Lord with *my* small wants (however significant they may seem to me). The first stanza arrests our attention by confronting us with an almost embarrassing moment which we

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ourselves have experienced *vis a vis* our own case and our beseeching of our Creator, with hat-in-hand, so to speak.

The second stanza, however, moves us from the intensely personal ideation of God to God as an illimitable force of nature:

Then He turns—so slow and simple,  
like a rainbow at its bending,  
like a great, brown river curving,  
like the reaching of the eagle in the majesty  
of gliding.

With a refrain of “He turns” the poet shows the motions, one after another, of the ways His turning exemplifies the in-the-world manifestations of his Being—through the changes of the seasons (“February melting into April,/March slow-greening into May”), the revolutions of the day (“like the eager flex of sun come forth/to cover us each morning”) and even the changes of being into non-being (“and all things stop their spinning,/ stop their churning; all passing things created/cease their racing and their fretting.”). And finally, in the last stanza, we find that He turns “and all things wait for Him/and wait with Him, and yearn with Him.” The final sentence becomes the apogee and the very center of the poem: “He gathers up our wanting in His voice.”

The fact that He speaks to us in his motions of nature, through Being and Non-being, through our human “waiting” for him to pay attention to us, through our wanting of this or that—all this is “gathered up” and cared for “in His voice.” That is to say, in his heavenly pronouncements of his presence in all things. The poem gives the assurance that all will be addressed, all will be cared for, it will all be gathered up in His voice.

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Before the ineffable, Dupree has a calm confidence and an artful simplicity that brings to life the question itself. In the poem "Winterset" we read:

And yet, the majesty of wind, of frost, of rain,  
the way the sun meets all of life  
with awful holiness

how can I speak of such a mystery?

Indeed, how can anyone speak of it, and yet, of course, she did with  
"the way the sun meets all of life/with awful holiness"

In yet another poem the poet's descriptive powers are amply demonstrated in these lines from "The Way Of It All":

a great horse stamping, nostrils steaming  
in the late chill, the weave of its mane in tossing,  
the arch, the swag of its tail and rippled gleam  
of shank; the ripened sweat-dung smell about it.

Not only is the scene vivid to the eye but one can physically enter into the picture and even smell it.

Yet another poem in the first section shows the poet's propensity for finding cause for encouragement in the simple beauty of the world. "Wind and Light and Sparrows" in its closing stanza seems representative of a number of her poems—simple, clear, with a lyrical flourish:

The earth will turn,  
will bow before the shadowed dark  
and shrug me on. . .  
but I am not undone, not chilled to hope.

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Light and wind have borne for me  
this burst of counterpoint, this exaltation  
beyond the plainsong eloquence of sparrows.

So, too, in “Doxology” the poet gives great thanks for the glories of Creation in all its manifestations, from the ordinary, common, even banal, to the extraordinary and miraculous:

Thank you, oh God,  
for the mind and its wanderings and wondering –  
for the way it wraps words around our longings  
and frames the codes of our civilities  
and describes our sin  
and proscribes our absolution.

The poet's prayers and poems of praise give palpable evidence, not only of her faith, but of the mysteries of life from which her faith emanates—caught in the prism of fresh imagery and phraseology. That is the essence not only of her poetry, but of poetry in general—its lovely, concise convinceability.

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In the second section of the collection, “*all you haven't lost*” the first poem strikes the theme with its “End of Season.” The poem has a dirge-like quality but, true to the theme of the second section, it calls up a hunger and deep thirst that survives the seasonal transition of loss and transformation. The third stanza of the poem highlights the process:

It is the end of season;  
the birds are fat with a gluttony of seed  
that dots their dung  
and ripens on the bald pate

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of soil beneath the tree.

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The leaves will season it; their dry veins  
opening again, cracked and hungry  
for the hot bloom of decay.

The images of the end of a season and the preparation for another is sounded and envisioned with the birds fattened on the spoil of autumn's surfeit. We see in their dung-- leavings the dotting of seeds. And we see the desiccate leaves "cracked and hungry/for the hot bloom of decay." The last two lines give the somewhat enigmatic statement of a lingering passion that has not been lost:

The tremble of my fingers  
is a deep, deep thirst.

With the second poem in the second section, we are presented with a four part poem which explains itself with its simple title, "Coveting It All." The first three parts of the poem are entitled "Alpine," "Shoreline," and "Grassland" Each of the three poems describe the location of the poets "coveting" with related descriptive imagery, moods, desires and affirmations. In "Apine," for example, the poet exalts in:

The toss of rocks  
that clump across your yard  
like giant seed, sowed  
from the earth's great hand.

She covets in this poem the rocks "ugly, beautiful asymmetry." The alpine location with its rocks and images are beguiling and call up the desires that consume her:

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I want to watch  
the way the sun pulls at them—  
knowing them, their hidden ecstasy,  
the unseen flowering  
beneath the moss that cloaks them.

In the “Shoreline” section she is moved to exclaim:

*Oh, God, the cleanness of it  
laps against my fouled ears!*

And the sea-swell,  
its bulge and heave; the way the sun  
spills into every brief translucence,  
repeating itself in myriad instant glories.

...

In the “Grassland” the third section, she marvels in her possessions; she dreams, she says “that this is mine as well.” She longs to be taken there:

*Take me there, and leave me there to rest.*

The bend of stunted trees,  
and spreads of shrub that feed and  
shelter life too hidden for your eyes;  
endless rippling grasses  
that gather up the sun in swollen husks;  
the musk of all that gathers up the sun.

The fourth part of the poem, is entitled “Sin of Coveting.” In it the poet speaks of her desire to wholly possess the world itself.

“The Sin of Coveting” is also effective and convincing. The lines move across the page with an inevitable simplicity and concinnity:

*I do not want what shelters only bones;*

these bones grow brittle while  
the seasons rise and fall across  
your hills and heaths,  
while waves ride steadily toward you

out across the swaggering seas.

And the poem continues:

*I want your share of earth  
the shadows of the sun, the leaning sky."*

She wants, in short, her desires to fill her senses with the natural, common beauties of the ordinary world. She wants it *to be hers*. Indeed, her covetousness moves her to make an affirmative confession of these "sinful" desires. She boldly concludes her commentary on her coveting with a complete lack of contrition, and well she knows it:

There, it's said.

*You know, of course, that I shall not repent.  
I want it all; it all possess me.*

The second section of this three part volume is filled with various kinds of poems—praises, narratives, credos, expostulations, descriptions, prayers and pronouncements. One of the most arresting and impressive, especially given the heart-felt "religious" sentiments that inform and shape so many of her verses, is one called "I Will Expose You, God."

I will expose You, God, where You hide  
behind the great gray universe,

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twinkling stars like marbles through the airless air.

I will trace the whorl of your great thumbprint,  
the dust of it, across the darkened sky,  
I will call Your bluff, and blow away  
the vapor screen  
that secrets You beyond our streaming eyes.

...

I will dare You—challenge You, elliptic God,  
to come and shout Your wordless name.

*Come!* Cry out Your name, and *ours*. . .  
*and mine*—as fervently as ecstasy of lightning,  
as certainly as thunder on our ears.

This second section (i.e., “*all you haven't lost*”) ends with “A Prayer.”  
A bold and beautiful poem, it seems to this writer to have a Davidic  
quality to it—terse, passionate, physical and lyrical. It opens with the  
following stanza:

O God  
Upholder of all You have ordained  
And all that flows forth  
From Your great, unending Genesis. . .

Catch up our struggling senses!  
Let us *smell the smell of You* –  
the scent of Grace. Breathe upon us, God,  
a cooling exhalation on the fever  
of our thoughts.

The prayer sounds a note of pleading for understanding, or so it seems,  
in the next stanza.



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The need for a *human* closeness with God, is a desire to make the Divine more familiar even to our very senses (“Let us *smell the smell of You*”)—for, in fact, we are different from God and our ways are not the same. The poet spells out one of the primal differences between God and ourselves, which, to some extent, makes us estranged for we are too “un-reasoning.”

Our ways are not Yours.

We cannot grasp the contents  
of your Father-heart; they are too high,  
too pure, too strict, too generous  
for our un-reasoning.  
We think too smallish to play god  
so readily, as we do.

The conviction that all meaning flows from the Deity and mankind's struggle is to be wholly dedicated to the Creator is expressed in one of the stanzas of “A Prayer.” And, in the same breath, the poet simply acknowledges that the fearful struggles of mankind's existence derives, in part, from all that God has placed “in our proximity.”

We have no vision, Lord,  
beyond our struggle to be Yours  
and yours alone.  
We are frightened often by the world –  
by the slavish greed and its endowments,  
by the lust for all that man has reaped  
and all that You have placed  
in our proximity

Though the Deity has placed “slavish greed and its endowments” before mankind we are told it is not God's fault that we are “frightened often

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by the world." Our fear derives from ourselves, by our separation, as it were, from God. The following stanza makes this clear:

All is tainted with our vanities and indifference.  
the land, the water that sustains us,  
the air that we befoul.  
we are afraid.

Mankind's fatal fault is that we have failed to yield ourselves to the governance of God and that is why we have faltered and are afraid:

We see the stumbling of our brash humanity,  
and know that we have faltered  
far too often  
yielded to Your being far too little.

Having fallen away from God we seek to escape from the consequences of our own hubris and try to rationalize our plight by further acts of hubris—false explanations of our condition:

We yearn now to escape our own undoing.  
We close our eyes and tell ourselves  
bright lies that cannot save us.

Our very identities, the essence of our beings, is bound-up in our relationship to the Deity—a relationship upon which we are wholly dependent for the very meaning of our lives. And, like children, we need to be told who we are, we need to be *named* or we are nameless things, that is to say meaningless things, of "muck and dust" without knowledge of our Divine lineage. By "naming" us God confers upon us our uniqueness, the very essence of our individual selves. Without this

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uniqueness, without this "local habitation and a name" we are indeed as  
airy, amorphous, and unparticulate things "signifying nothing."

Tell us who we are, God.  
Tell us why You dared create such beings  
as we who grovel through our muck and dust.

Tell us of the shining of our souls  
Beneath the filth.  
Tell us we are Yours, and *name* us so.

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The title of the third and concluding section of the collection gives it its name, "*living with what remains.*" Following the section "*all you haven't lost*" the poet moves toward a dénouement and sums up the collection with continuing affirmations derived from a life of faith, struggle and experience. Here no palliatives are offered for living with what remains. The poet takes a clear close look at the way things are. In a collection of many splendid poems the last section offers some of the most superlative.

The opening poem of the last section is entitled "Late" and it confronts the fact of our struggles with life, with age and our mortal coils even unto the time when we are all but swallowed up, *sans* everything:

It is late.  
The days fall into each other,  
are swallowed up.  
The moon yawns widely,  
swallows up the sun.

We are choking on the world,  
which is broken into fragments indigestible.

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We hate, we slash, we care.

Some of us have lost our eyes, our ears;  
we have no voices left, no limbs to carry us,  
to bear the weight  
of this world that we have wounded  
to some safer place.

But where is that safer place and what is safe, the poem asks:

And what is safe?

*"Vanity, all is vanity,"* said the wisest king,  
And he swallowed up his enemies.

Our tongues are parched;  
We cannot swallow any of it.

Nonetheless, we are told we continue to struggle to remain alive and to live with what remains even if we scour the dirt for scraps, which seems like manna to us. The poem concludes with the following stanza:

But the crumbs still fall around us  
like remnants of the king's forgotten banquet.  
We gather them like manna,  
we scour the dirt.

Many of the succeeding poems, however, offer the reader far more than crumbs. For example, "I Bring To You" offers a poem rich in imagery. It opens with an arresting stanza (which is apparently a hooked continuing line beneath the title, "I Bring To You":

the great spotted cat that lopes across the pampas,

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its soft pads tracing ancient trails.

The bright burn of its eyes pierce the darkness.

They will rivet your soul.

The second stanza, too, brings to us another marvelous image, also primitive and palpable:

And here—accept the giant turtle,

his dome precisely furrowed

like a clot of knobby earth. He swam the seas

before the siege of Vicksburg,

rode the backs of waves that pounded brigantines,

dug himself out of a sandy birth-tomb

when this land was still a virgin.

He dies in our nets and is cast upon the waters.

In a series of stanzas “I Bring To You” presents images of nature in its varied states and textures, inviting a kind of mirror image for our human condition (“The oceans grown old now--/like xeriscapes collapsed to skeletal remains” etc.).

Many of the poems in the last section “*living with what remains*” are touched with a nostalgic pain and feeling of poignant loss. The mood is caught in one of the stanzas that give the section its name, “Living With What Remains.”:

What remain we cannot yet decipher,

nor give to it a name, but we hear beneath it all

that voice of grief which echoes through

the thinning trees and wails along the shallow

prairies – *night music* Amadeus never dreamt of.

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That "voice of grief" which runs through the poems of the collection is nonetheless beautified with a graceful lyric sense and a wonderful eye for nature's lovely images. It has been said that our poet, Judith Dupree, is a "contemplative poet" and so she is. And, to some extent, she is a didactic poet, informing not only with her rhythms and imagery but by the content of her discursive commentaries. In "The Way Things Work" we get a good taste of the didactic which exposes the *Weltschmerz* that informs her work and also her profession of faith.

This is the way things work.

We label everything – oh, *ecstasy* and *duty*  
and, let say, *living*;  
and *sorrow* – that stick pin in the jugular  
we cannot swallow past.  
Yes, there is more, much more—  
how can we name it all?

Let's say the world disintegrates  
and leaves no traces, nothing but a heap of  
words that rise like smoke.

*What do they mean, now!*

Maybe this: that we have lived for  
something less than meaning, tossing off  
our lives like candy wrappers  
when the sweet stuff's gone.

Of course, it's tempting to keep our soul's  
requirements tucked in a briefcase;  
handy, should we need them on the run –  
a pick-me-up when

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the *Weltschmerz* brings me down.

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And then, the voice of affirmation, joy even, is sounded in the last stanza—a joy derived it would seem from reflection, from observing the world, and, in particular, the world of the child.

But I say: watch the way a little child  
unfolds his tongue and tastes the syllables  
he hears, and plunders them  
for sound – and calls the world to order.  
For the love of it. For the love of the whole of it.

If we have lived, as the poet suggests, “for something less than meaning” and if the world disintegrates and leaves “nothing/but a heap of words that rise like smoke,” still the poet points to one of life’s transcendent experiences—the watching of the little child reveling in the elementary acts of being and becoming as it “unfolds his tongue and tastes the syllables/he hears, and plunders them/for sound –and calls the world to order.” And this existential act of being-in-the-world implies a motive force, the simple inexplicable love incarnate in existence and which shows itself in the infant’s affirmative essence, “For the love of it. For the love of the whole of it.”

The message of many of the poems in this edifying collection seems to be that nature in its beauty and faith in its essence not only allows us to endure but also nourishes mankind’s endurance with a song. And the music of that song itself transforms our pain and suffering into a new and deeper knowledge of self. In “The One True Thing” we are told to “Believe in what you always knew./It has not forgotten *you*.” We are further admonished to take it to ourselves:

Coax it patiently.  
Like a wild thing caught in a snare,  
It will observe you guardedly –

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Examine you for the scent of the guile.

*elm -- commentary*

That which we have always known, that grace of Eden before the dried shibboleths is the precious essence of our being, which cannot be eradicated or destroyed by the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”—if we but remake it our own. This essence-of-ourselves though it may seem a “sudden stranger/to your patterned thought,/this outcast waiting quietly at the fringe” will, if reaffirmed, not only strengthen us in our trials but will allow us to prevail:

Live with it, perhaps uncomfortably,

until you are conformed,  
until your face in the mirror crinkles  
with a shaft of delight  
and speaks back to you in a beautiful new tongue –  
and you know at last who you are, and why.

Now you are ready to brave the world.  
Now you are ready to save it.

And we are ready to brave the world, even to save it, we are told, if we are open to the beauty of the world and its mystery—if we are able to become nature itself and to see ourselves in nature we can transform our fear, as is noted here in “Some Likeness Unforeseen.”:

The elm lifts its solemn face upwards,  
begging light, breaking light in prisms  
with its slanted arms. Does it remember,  
cell-bound, how the earth first broke its life  
to shimmering replication  
from a million broken faces of the sun.



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*elm -- commentary*

Another effective verse which tells the tale of the poets struggle in vivid images is to be found in "I Would Come" which opens with a compelling stanza:

*If there were nothing more  
than sunrise to remind me  
of the light,  
nothing but the setting sun to  
mitigate the night. . .*

"I Would Come" expresses a profession of faith in the face of catastrophe. Again, the words are simple, clear, immediate, and cast into tactile and convincing imagery. The first stanza opens the theme:

I would feel my way  
through shadow heaped on shadow,  
past each dark and tensed catastrophe,  
sensing them, their rustling near like  
great coiled snakes  
that swallow up the moon and  
hunger still.

The words call up the classical theme of universal catastrophes, the times when the moon was "swallowed up" and still hungered for more and even bigger victims. The time when shadow was "heaped on shadow" and one passed "each dark and tensed catastrophe." The classical image (indigenous to most of the world's ancient cultures) of a great snake swallowing up the moon is presented as a symbol of the dread event. The poem then moves on to the subject of experiencing such cosmically destructive events and the resultant affirmation despite the world's falling apart.

I would come gingerly,  
but I would come,  
my toes curled hard against  
the shattered earth.  
O, I would come singing  
with a loud bravado—or in whispers  
much to hoarse to hear. . .

The words speak for themselves. Despite the shattered earth the poet would come forth gingerly, that is to say with spirit and affirmation, even with “toes curled hard against/the shattered earth.” And the poet

would come forward, still seeking union and wholeness, despite the catastrophe. She would come “singing/with a loud bravado, or, if needs be, “in whispers much to hoarse to hear. . .” In whatever form, however diminished, whether capable of loud song, or only hoarse whispers, still, the poet tells us:

But I would come to you beyond this  
great eclipse, I promise you—  
bearing gifts of morning  
and of twilight.

The poem has an attractive self-completing symmetry as the last stanza completes the lead-in stanza, and gives the impression of a completed rhyme (though there is technically no ending rhyme in the poem). Again, we have a poem of spirited intentionality, of affirmation in the face of destructive challenge. The gifts of the morning, the gifts of twilight, are, in effect, the gifts of continuing process beyond the “tensed catastrophes” of life.

The final poem in the book “Living With What Remains” reiterates many of the same sentiments and insights of many of the poems in the

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collection. Here, again, the poet concludes the collection with an expression of a religious conviction, a conviction transcendental to our earthly experiences in all their grief and glory. The poem speaks of taking that last walk "Home" with "arms full of dreams both live and shriveled." It speaks of meeting that moment with "hearts too scarred/to beat a steady rhythm,/too heavy/to tote another load, too light/ to hold us fixed upon the earth. . ." And, in a lovely brief stanza, reminiscent of the Deity-personalizing spirit of "And He Turns" the poet expresses her all consuming faith:

He comes,  
He simply steps from nothing

into everything and everywhere  
and all that was  
and is and never came to be.

The affirmation of the poet is, generally throughout, made all the more convincing and palatable in that she does not shrink from the recognition of the hard realities of existence. But the poems accept this condition as the given, even a given that adds greater significance to the whole. He not only "steps from nothing/into everything and everywhere" but also into "all that was/and is and never came to be." "All that never came to be" adds a note of almost painful poignancy as it alludes to all those dreams of each of us that did not "come true" and yet which are part of the true wholeness of each person.

But the poignancy of that which "never came to be" is itself made whole in the final destination of reaching one's Home, ones death and living life in the Creator. For that which was not, in this world, becomes upon reaching Home, the "isness" of one's higher existence. The last stanza, in its first four words, sums up these complex relationships in a statement of almost ineffable affirmation:

And now it is;  
now we are real again, and fathom all,  
and find our Home, and enter it  
and live there.

At the end, we “are real again” and we “fathom all”—we have found our center once again, the poet seems to be saying, and when we enter into our death we enter into our God relationship, which is our true home, the only Home, in fact, which we can enter “and live there.”

The poet's job, it seems to this writer, especially the job of a religious poet (or, perhaps better, a poet of religious sentiments) is not to

proselytize, not to make arguments or appeal to doctrines, but to witness and to witness through an affirmation of the infinite miracles of time and space allotted to every mortal in their moral coil.

Ultimately, it seems to this writer, that *living with what remains* is a kind of abbreviated epic, a song of trial, endurance and affirmation. With great economy of words and beautiful language the poet, Judith Dupree, seeks to lead the reader and herself through the three phases of passage of the experienced life: through what is (“All That Is”) with all its beauty, trials and tribulations, to a realization of what is not lost by faith's struggles with life's trials and demands (“All You Haven't Lost”), to a wide-eyed acceptance of *le condition humane* (“Living With What Remains”). In some vital respects it may be said that her poem is an existential confrontation with mankind's essential metaphysical reality. And, consonant with life's fullness and variety, in addition to the “serious” side there are also many balancing light moments in the collection, poems full of good humor and precious, loving, descriptions of nature in its myriad forms. With impressive simplicity and artfulness the author's poetry gives moving testimony to the fact that beauty is truth and truth beauty and that both are integral to each other and realized in an acceptance and affirmation of our original

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existence—which is entirely dependent for their meaning upon the  
Divine.

*ELM*