

Ian Colford

Stations of the Left Hand by Don Domanski (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994)

There are writers whose voice and vision are of such wondrous and grotesque originality that they seem to inhabit another dimension or universe, or, at the very least, another mythology or culture. Don Domanski is one such writer.

Don Domanski has written six books of poetry. Over the decade and a half that separated *The Cape Breton Book of the Dead* (1975) and *Wolf-Ladder* (1991) he refined his terse style into a concentrated elixir of metaphors and images, cryptic aphorisms, and incantatory musings. *Stations of the Left Hand* continues in this vein in its five sections, compelling the reader to the periphery of the knowable world. This is poetry for both students and lovers of language, full of impressionistic set pieces and occult wordplay: the verbal equivalent of a painting by Marc Chagall.

Domanski's verse does not observe literary formalities or the common order of things as we know them; it does not arrange itself

according to familiar rules; it does not confine itself to the safety of conventional forms; nor does it dispense 'meaning' as if it were a reward for reading lines in the correct sequence. Rather, the effect of these poems is cumulative. As we read, impressions imprint themselves upon the mind, and as we gather images and sensations together we gain insight by increments, until the world appears transmuted by Domanski's dexterous verbal alchemy.

Many of these poems are set in a natural world, among commonplace things and beings, but there is nothing commonplace about the way in which Domanski employs these in the service of his vision. 'My Letter of Regret' begins with 'tonight the sky is heavy/with wiry stars/the snow with footprints/of wolf and mailman/deep in the forest/carrying my letter of regret to you.' The spare language throws each detail into stark relief. We pause over 'wiry,' and again at the juxtaposition of 'wolf' and 'mailman,' which reminds us of the close affiliation between the nocturnal (subconscious, vaguely menacing) and the everyday. We have before us a full portrait—a snowy landscape, figures moving about—as well as a sensation of loss, the murky spectre of past wrongs. Then the poem closes with 'your door beneath the echoes/of bedclothes frozen/to all the surrounding trees/the sipping of icy sounds/from all the trees.' These few words evoke a picture of a remote burial ground in the dark, giving the poem its subtle poignancy.

In 'Before the Plague and the Breaking of Fingers,' a powerful meditation on memory and death, the narrator states, 'in the valley I walked/under chestnut trees/watching black ants/as long as pencil stubs/the ants Nostradamus/predicted would swallow/the world.' If the essence of the poetic voice is to be found in how the poet's mind explores language and connects it to the visible world, then Domanski's voice is like no other in the connections it draws. The poem continues, 'I'm a lucky man/because I've seen such things/because every dog loves me/and crows fly by/like shiny raincoats/just minutes before it rains.' Here, as in other poems, we are guided gently into a familiar yet alien environment, a place that often takes us by surprise, offering unexpected vistas and startling perspectives, revealing the uniqueness of each apparently ordinary object, each creature that roams into the poet's sights.

Domanski's poems appear on the page as if stripped to their essentials. He tends to favour short lines and makes sparing use of capital letters. Punctuation is reduced to the period marking the end of each poem or section. These are stylistic choices that give the poems a distinctive appearance on the page. However, these particular choices also underscore the meditative qualities of the plain, graceful language, which flows and drifts like water, caressing but

not swamping the subject; never pontificating or entering into argument, or even emphasizing one word over another.

The poems in *Stations of the Left Hand* resonate with earth tones, they are animated with sounds and smells and with the presence of all description of animals and natural phenomena. At work in these poems you will find the dynamics of opposing forces—light and dark, night and day, death and life—as well as the rustle of foliage, the stirring of worms within the earth, the peculiar demon shapes that inhabit our dreams. Domanski's world is at once fecund and alive, troubling and miraculous, enigmatic and spellbinding, his style elusive and intangible. Few contemporary poets strive for originality the way Domanski does, few succeed with such dazzling verve. In the end we are left marvelling at his control of language and the dark potency of his vision.