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Stinkbug

You cannot help but pulp them
    as you peddle to work
        While swerving to preserve

one's foulest odor
    another offers its oily demise
        On mornings cool and overcast as this

the world's suicides seem to surface
    or you begin to view everything as
        pre-meditation in your path

What I'd trade to once zigzag
    home and back without indictment
        I was twenty-nine before I saw a stinkbug

turn its weapon skyward
    the oddest of insect calisthenics
        I thought how pure instinct could be

that my own repertoire had grown certainly staid
    The obvious teaches us nothing
        How often have they noted my approach

How often have they soured the dawn air
    trusting their worn strategy
        would be enough to carry them across the road
Coleoptera

After day’s heat
    after an evening of dirt
    hardened to soft stone

eye emerge
    these weevils
    these righteous sons

awash in an unsuspecting land
    It is not difficult to spot them
    their yellow-black

their ambitious quietude
    their evangelistic nonchalance
    God bless their hideousness

God bless the way
    I have refused to accept
    my own certain decay
Author Notes

Jeff Schiff is author of Anywhere in this Country (Mammoth Press), The Homily of Infinitude (Pennsylvania Review Press), The Rats of Patzcuaro (Poetry Link), Resources for Writing About Literature (HarperCollins), and Burro Heart (Mammoth Press). His work has appeared internationally in more than seventy periodicals, including Grand Street, The Ohio Review, Poet & Critic, The Louisville Review, Tendril, Pembroke Magazine, Carolina Review, Chicago Review, Hawaii Review, Southern Humanities Review, River City, Indiana Review, and The Southwest Review. He has taught at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

About the Work

I began writing the two poems you see in Segue in, gulp, 1979. That’s a thirty year arc for these puppies. Such is not to say that I have been working on them ever since. Rather, it is to say that sometimes you have the chance and an urge to return to old insight with a bit of current stylistic energy.

“Coleoptera” (which is a fancy “beetle” reference I remember appropriating at the time) is an ordered poem. It leans on song, but does so as a way of saying something, of preaching about self-awareness. So many of my poems do just that: use the natural world as a way of coming to terms with the inner world. Looking out to look in. It was what I was taught to do. Not art for art’s sake, but art in the service of awareness. As I look at it now, I think how uncharacteristically optimistic it is. In my fifties, I wish I could still say: “God bless the way/ I continue to refuse/ my own certain decay.” These days, I’d be lucky to manage: “God bless my own certain decay.”

The second poem, “Stinkbug,” is in many ways a WYSIWIG offering. What you see is what you get. Poet-speaker can’t help but kill bugs while cycling to work… In a minor minor way, it invokes the ethical/moral dilemma at the center of William Stafford’s “Traveling through the Dark.” I think he wrote, “swerving might make more dead.” As I look back on it now, I’m not sure that I believe what the speaker in my poem utters, “The obvious teaches us nothing.” Looking at the poem head on now, I must admit that I feel quite sad about the existential state of its 29 year old speaker—who, even at that tender age, was already fighting and fighting hard against the routinized, the habitual.

Jeff Schiff on the Web

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