



And The Rough Places

Tom Gillaspay

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Tension, struggle, conflict consume every dimension of existence. They fill the blank spaces between nature and human, tradition and modernity, improper and proper, real and surreal with the ghosts of their actions. These tense, blank spaces are the realm of these poems, pitting the timeless qualities of mountains, wilderness lakes, tradition, and surreal visions against the harsh realities of poverty, global competition, expedient development, bigotry, and high def. In this poetic space, time is a spiral, not an arrow. Change occurs, but with a gracefulness that modern societies find cumbersome. Faster is not always better. The title of this collection, “And The Rough Places”, is from Isaiah 40:4, echoing the “voice in the wilderness” that tells us struggle will change everything and what is now unclear will become clear. The implications of change are not well understood and may have far reaching and unintended, nonlinear consequences. The farmer in the high Andean plateau tends his terrace with a pre-Columbian plow, pulled by a bull whose ancestors arrived with the Conquistadores, talks to his relatives in the US on his cell phone, living in at least two millennia simultaneously. Or the young shepherd in northern Kenya who guards his goats with bow and arrow against hyena and leopards, while keeping in touch with his village via cell phone. Better communications, better health, better diet, better education, and prosperity are all laudable goals, but they come with costs and implications that we don’t yet fully understand. The young couple, one in Beijing, the other in Houston, repulsed by the ugliness, greed, and pollution around them, have a virtual love affair in Second Life, a world of their creation where all is beautiful and peaceful. Environment and culture change is everywhere and growing. I welcome modern life with its convenience but lament the bleeding of trees and scars on the faces of mountains. I despair the loss of languages and ancient customs that help heal the soul. In my career as a demographer, making forecasts of populations, I have necessarily lived simultaneously in the past, present and future. The image in my brain of what the future will look like, always so clear in the past, grows murky with increasing uncertainty. In work, I lived in the 21st Century while dreaming of days I spent hiking the wilderness with Walt Whitman in the 19th. I hear the buzz of the chain saw while working on my computer, but in my mind wolf and owl speak to me. Poems and images in this collection reflect the internal and external conflicts of these tensions and the ghosts they spawn.

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