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Tomorrow's Living Room

Jason Whitmarsh

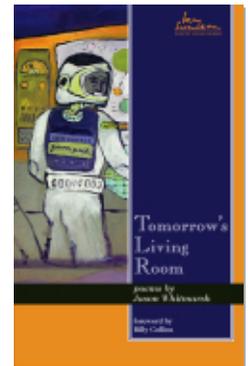
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FOREWORD

Tomorrow's Living Room is simply too good a collection of poems to allow me to indulge in the customary literary judge's protestations about how difficult it was to choose among so many excellent manuscripts. There were reading pleasures to be had along the way, and I fully enjoyed them, but the winner jumped out at me, as I hope it will for you, like a big bass breaking the surface of a lake after a long spell of staring at the water.

The poems speak for themselves, of course, but let me offer a word on their behalf.

We all appreciate a certain degree of clarity in the poems we read (don't we?), but we also like being blind-sided by abrupt shifts and turns we did not see coming. *Tomorrow's Living Room* is just such an exciting and accomplished mixture of directness and imaginative surprise. In paging through the manuscript, I found myself walking blithely into one poem after another, comforted by the casual, familiar tone of a colloquial voice only to find myself soon lost in a zone not of my own making—a stranger in Jason Whitmarsh's strange, alluring verbal land. Whenever I heard the door of tomorrow's living room clicking shut behind me, I knew I was in for some pleasurable disorientation.

These poems love getting off to a flying start. Many opening lines made me feel as if the poet and I had already been involved in an ongoing exchange to which I needed to pay more attention. "My stun gun no longer stuns much" one poem begins, striking a casual yet disturbing note. Another starts out by telling me "I don't mind the story you're telling, but can you please lean back in the chair and turn the light down." "What chair?" the logical part of me wants to ask, but the other part knows better. And there is no need to waste time establishing a setting when you can begin a poem with "I had the last undertaker in my pocket" or "Here we are in our lackluster hats."

Also keeping the reader on his or her toes is the mix of forms deployed by Whitmarsh, including prose poems, some standard quatrains, a one-line poem—there is even a clerihew for Dick Cheney. While taking advantage of the imaginative freedoms offered exclusively by poetry, these poems work carefully within chalk circles of limitation.

With so many poets working the American idiom these days, it is a wonder to find one with an original voice, but Jason Whitmarsh has carved out a verbal territory for himself unlike anyone else's. It is the kind of voice that whistles for our attention.

Billy Collins

