



Declaration for Your Bones

by Scott Ash

From its opening poem, Duane Esposito's *Declaration For Your Bones* announces its intention and its voice to the reader. The collection addresses powerfully and compellingly marriage, anorexia, love, pain, and the desire for release. Its poems belie their visual simplicity and force the reader time and again to face what is difficult and uncomfortable as well as what is beautiful and transcendent.

That first poem, "Vacancy," ends in a couplet that sets the stage linguistically, structurally, and thematically for the rest of the book. The poem concludes: "We insist on declaration, & every faith, / every crisis, every word is fiction." At the same time clear and contradictory, the lines challenge the reader by insisting on taking seriously its speaker's thoughts, feelings and experiences because they are, at once, real and imagined.

Later, in "Once More in the Whitecaps Of Pain," Esposito, an Associate Professor of English at Nassau Community College, reveals even more of the collection's agenda.

Again & again – draft after draft –
I've tried to say a simple thing:
I'm lonely, & I'm tired of the pain.

These lines dramatize the difficulty of doing such a "simple thing." That naming one's pain, that asking for comfort should take "draft after draft" reminds the reader that neither the source of our pain or the bravery to face it are easily found.

The collection reads as if its poems result from the poet's deliberate and careful efforts to chisel away all that gets in the way of naming our pain or finding the necessary courage to face it. The reader can hear that effort in the unrhymed couplets that make up many of the poems in the collection. Thus, violations of the pattern as in "The Starving" where the poet writes "Memory, of course, / is the color of remorse, / especially as we live and dream" become all the more powerful.

The reader can see this effort in the use of ampersands and enjambments to link lines in Esposito's own version of a kind of sprung rhythm. The result in "Spring:"

& I'm growing tired
of the time that's passing.

& you're embracing loneliness
as a necessary silence,

& here's another boredom
& another humiliation

one more moment
& yet another hour,

another declaration
for yet another season.

builds to an emotional culmination that feels true to the references to "loneliness," "boredom," and "humiliation." There is an undeniable sense of exhaustion in the drawing out of the lines that the ampersands and enjambments make inescapable.

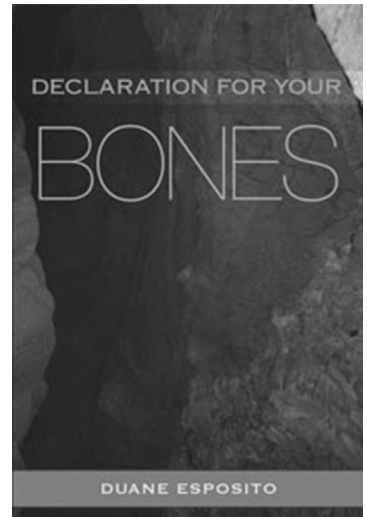
But finally, for Esposito, the process of getting to the essence of the matter is rendered most powerfully through metaphor. The one he uses often to describe this process is chewing or gnawing. What is chewed changes. In "September," the speaker talks about chewing September to deal with the aftershocks of the 9/11 attacks. In "The Loons," the speaker wants to stop chewing "the bruises of history" in order to "refuse to be dragged / through infantile desires." In both cases, the poems seek out tension so that it can be recognized (perhaps even embraced) in order to be relieved.

Here and in many of the poems in the collection, a tension is described that seems most analogous to friction. Like fiction in the physical world, the friction Esposito's poems contain is created when ideas are forced into juxtapositions resulting in productive energy, in a kind of heated intensity. In "Around Here," the speaker asks:

Tell me, please, is love
recovery or a blast of light?

Proximity or distance?
What's the difference?

What starts out as plaintive ("please") ends in apparent resignation ("What's the difference?"). But it is the tension between "proximity" and "distance" that captures the reader's focus. Reinforced



by its slant rhyme with “difference,” “distance” serves a double purpose. It connotes a gap, even a chasm, because it still refers to a separation even when it describes “proximity”.

In other poems, unexpected humor emerges when Esposito strips down his work emotional or structurally to focus on the tension in our lives. When the speaker of “So Much Explodes” describes himself as “the single, black cloud / hovering inside our home,” the reader sees the metaphor as an honest assessment of the speaker’s feelings of pain and guilt about the state of his relationship. But, these lines are followed by the exclamation: “My God, I hate ceilings.” The absurdity of directing hatred towards ceilings punctures the speaker’s metaphoric self-assessment, as if ceilings are all that stands in the way of the speaker getting relief, of allowing the speaker’s “black cloud” self to rise up and to escape its problems.

All is not bleakness in *Declaration For Your Bones*. In his “A Note to the Reader,” the collection’s publisher/editor, Ralph Nazareth, writes personally and movingly about Esposito’s collection and concludes by inviting the reader to examine the collection: “Come drink. It’s bitter. But it’s good.” This note acknowledges the way in which Esposito’s work confronts what is difficult as what it is necessary to survive, perhaps even to thrive. Esposito provides a sense of that idea in “September” which concludes “I think there’s no cure for us -- / if we want to go on living.” The lines argue that experiencing pain is part of life and that wanting to live requires acceptance of that fact.

In other poems, unexpected humor emerges when Esposito strips down his work emotional or structurally to focus on the tension in our lives.

In “The Loons” and “Echoes of California,” the collection’s final two poems, the reader sees the speaker’s pain diminished and even transcended. The absence of a “gone father” in “The Loons” is reduced because it is addressed. The loons leave the “whitecaps of pain” and exist now only in dream where “they sleep near my head / & twitch against my neck.” The trauma of loss becomes less a nightmare and more an occasional presence of which the sleeper remains aware.

The horizon where the sun rises in “Echoes of California” becomes a “distance without confusion” instead of the distance that could not be understood in “Around Here.” Instead of the loneliness of “Limbo & The Rain,” “Echoes of California” offers the possibility of relationship and communion; “You see, I don’t own your bones, / You gave them to me long ago--/on a floor beneath a blanket, / in the dark, alone -- & I held them.” Not all embraces come complete with a romantic score and scenery, but even the ones taking place in simple and unlit settings matter.

Readers of Duane Esposito’s *Declaration For Your Bones* will encounter an uncompromising clear voice. The poems are as they were meant to be and, at once, command and reward the reader’s attention.

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By Duane Esposito

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