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“Charting the Energy of the Earth”
Approx. 1,200 Words

Charting the Energy of the Earth

So This Is the Map
Poems by Reg Saner
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After Reg Saner’s *Climbing Into the Roots* won the 1975 Walt Whitman Award, the book caught hell in some quarters. Too much wit, a few reviewers complained, by which they meant wordplay. In the wake of Vietnam, Allende’s sordid murder, the Watergate scandals — why listen to a poet who wrote about backpacking? Irony was okay if the tone was sober. But here was a writer with a poem entitled “How the Laws of Physics Love Chocolate!” How sober could a man be who would write: “At ponds / whose tundra edges seem rich / I put my hand on Miss America’s muff”?

I suspect the same reviewers will ask similar questions about Saner’s new book, *So This Is the Map*. The language is even more playful, the subjects more varied; there are poems on moons and milkweed, planetariums, camping and music, interstates and photographs, Chief Joseph and Doc Holliday’s grave. If such abundance is not enough,

the reviewers I have in mind will surely be galled by the fact that *So This Is the Map* appears as one of the five new books in the prestigious National Poetry Series.

What makes Saner’s particular voice so refreshing is summed up well in these lines from “Prayer to St. Francis Among Others,” a fine and characteristic poem:

As against any whining of thin blood
Let my words reflect this actual earth wholeheartedly, heartily.
If not your faith in those hosannas
heard beyond the stars, lend me, St. Francis,
lend me your answerable verve.

How much “whining of thin blood” we’ve heard in recent American poetry! And how little verve. . . .

Not that Saner is a cheerful poet. “Lately I’ve seen myself,” he writes, “as making a hole in the light / the light should have back, / seen each boulder as home.” And in “From Chief Joseph I Turn the Page,” we hear the quiet dismay of a man facing up to our Western states’ genocidal history, as chronicled in old photos:

Now that the West is won
these men are wrong. Where are they standing?
The land my house is on? I see old-time
brass buttons, tunics, hammerlock carbines
saying I could not have been there,
and these faces, saying I am.

There are larger terrors too, such as the lunar eclipse recorded in “Night Event”:

The oldest memory, hanging huge
and weightless and still—telling how little
we live in this world, or any other,
at what unfathomable speeds.
And under us all, the sun

burning like rain.

Saner is realistic enough to know that each of us is “a nothingness, breathing.” But instead of despair, he feels amazement.

It’s the struggle between what he knows and what he feels, between reason and emotion, that makes Saner’s work so rich. The flux he finds in the world and in himself creates not only a strong, rhythmical style, but generates some astonishing metaphors. Of “Anasazi at Mesa Verde” he writes: “Villages not half as wide / as a voice . . . tucked / under a tidal wave / of cliff.” And in “Essay on Earth”: “Magma buckles, cleaves open / like the wound in Adam’s side.” Often there are reversals of expectation that would seem merely clever if they weren’t so *right*, as in “Interstate,” where Saner points out “a Texaco pump, / its hose sucking fresh credit / out of my tank.” And in another road poem, “Ground Blizzard, Interstate 70,” he shocks us with “the snow tires / [that] whine like slow learners trying too hard.” Then there are the lines in which metaphor and musical grace perfectly mesh, such as these first lines of “The Dawn Collector”: “And the southern sky’s faintest stars slip away, tambourines / shaken just out of earshot.”

When Saner’s poems fail — and a few in this book do — they fail either because the metaphors feel too far-fetched or because the music falters. What else can we do but wince at “immortal portal”? Or stumble over “Glenwood Springs / whose voluptuous prospect of green, ore-bearing hills / seems nudes, oiling whorehouse bars”? And how not feel some unintentional humor in “the sun blurts up again, again — / spinning BB in a can”?

But we can easily forgive the few flaws in *So This Is the Map* because Saner never becomes a talking head the way glib poets like James Merrill or John Ashbery so often do. We

seem to hear this poet speaking from deep inside his body about the real world of his experience. At his best, Saner seems to speak from a depth beyond emotion and reason — a third place, where desire and logic no longer struggle, and grace enters. Not simple felicity, but grace in the old sense. By which I don't mean to suggest that *So This Is the Map* is some fuzzy, pseudo-mystical text, but that its particulars often seem to throw off what Robert Bly calls “ecstatic energy.”

One way this energy appears is in Saner's attitude toward the natural world. He typically assumes that the earth is conscious — a healthy assumption he shares with poets like Bly, Stafford, and Snyder. In the book's first poem, “The Day the Air was on Fire,” he notes how high mountain vegetation uses rocks,

Improvising soil from palmfuls of grit,
saying “If not this season, the next —
perhaps the one after,” and coming on
very small, coming on uphill,
against everything.

Nature is not something that happens without us, Saner implies everywhere, and keeping that in mind brings joy. In “Milkweed,” for instance, the poet's share in the seeding process becomes a figure for the artist's enterprise itself:

The game's to try again and again
how many hundred yards the furthest breath carries,
watching its endlessly invisible difference
sown in the field.

Patience, humility, delight — they emerge together throughout Saner's work.

“Ecstatic energy” surfaces more purely, however, in the last few poems; they make up the section from which the book draws its title, pulling together several major themes: how the self is jealous of the world’s size; how mortality invigorates desire; how ascent (always in the form of mountain-climbing) brings clarity, magnifying consciousness itself until it’s no longer limited by personality and history. “And what do I see?” he asks. “Always the same splendor.” The joyous but hard-earned grace is nowhere more available in the book than in the final poem, “Knowing Me Well.” Descending a mountain at dusk, the poet thinks of his shadow:

Because for a moment I stood
holding its arms out wide
as part of the rim
the planet’s umbra extending

knowing me well you know
how going to sleep in the tent
I feel that shadow
continue

falling how far how far

and imagine what maybe just now
is swimming into its arms
and someday myself
passing through them

This is not “faith in those hosannas / heard beyond the stars,” but the exuberant fatalism of Whitman.

What I think we have in Reg Saner, in fact, is a Whitman without the lavish ego. A self-ironic Whitman who still knows how to celebrate. Readers who have tired of the ponderous, the

prosy, and the plain boredom of so much recent American verse will find so *This Is the Map* cause for their own celebration.