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Review of Marion's "Ebbing & Flowing Springs: New and Selected Poems and Prose, 1976-2001"

William Jolliff

George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

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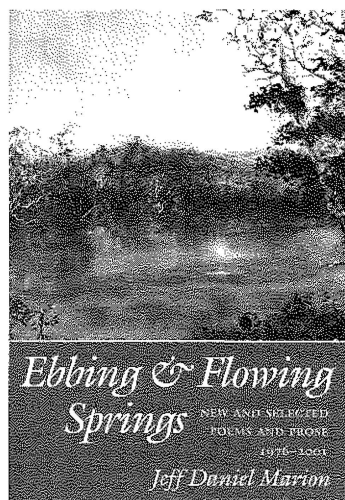
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**Ebbing & Flowing Springs:
New and Selected Poems and Prose,
1976-2001.**

By Jeff Daniel Marion (Knoxville, TN:
Celtic Cat, 2002) \$24.95, cloth. ISBN:
0965895033, 219 pp.

Poetry collections subtitled “new and selected” have now become commonplace, a phenomenon that critic Judith Kitchen has discussed with her customary insight (*Georgia Review*, 49.2, 501). Kitchen suggests that the subtitle communicates a “posthumous feel,” inviting an assessment of the poet’s career.

Despite this book’s title, *Ebbing & Flowing Springs: New and Selected Poems and Prose, 1976-2001*, it would be wrong-headed to attempt to assess Jeff Daniel Marion’s contribution in a review. After all, his writing and reputation are familiar to readers of *Appalachian Journal*. He spent most of his career teaching at Carson-Newman College, and for decades he has moved in the circles of important Appalachian writers, developing a considerable readership and earning significant critical attention. Given the difficulties of literary press publishing, a “new and selected” volume is likely a practical strategy for keeping earlier work in print and helping it gain broader reading. That’s certainly my hope for this deserving collection.



Whatever its primary intention, *Ebbing & Flowing Springs* serves as a record of the poet's craft to date, demonstrating his evolving formal achievement and a deepening of his relationship with his region. Because Marion grew up in Rogersville, Tennessee, and still lives in Knoxville, we can hardly imagine an Appalachian native less in need of deepening his relationship with his home country. But the selections do suggest an important progression: from being an Appalachian poet to being a poet of Appalachia.

The opening poems from *Out in the Country*, *Back Home* seem at once familiar with the Appalachian setting, yet psychologically distant from it. "In a Southerly Direction" presents an irony grounded in the failure of a rural man to anticipate a returning traveler's lack of familiarity with his region. His directions conclude with

it's the farm across the way
from Jesse's old barn
that burned down
last June
with them 2 fine mules
of his.
Why hell, son,
you can't miss it. (3)

Marion's poems reinforce the distance with the suggestive objectivity of paintings. "Watercolor of an East Tennessee Farm," for example, presents an intentionally stereotypical picture—"Always there is a backporch / its screen door ajar..."—a typification made palatable by the implication that the poem's meaning is between the lines, resting in the distance between stereotype and particulars, knowledge the speaker assumes (4). He is returning to recover a history and communicate the changes. His attention turns to things once vital but now abandoned, whether a classroom ("Going Back for J.L.," 15), a berry patch ("Heritage," 13), or an old barn ("Loft," 8). The well house has been razed and the "wooden shingles lie scattered / like the scales of a life / shed" ("Razing the Well House," 23). Such vignettes communicate a sense of the region, but in a rhetorical context grounded in *familiarity* with the place, not an *identification* with it.

Some few poems, however, suggest a vitality grounded in the past. In "J.D.M.," for instance, the speaker revisits home with his father, who "kneels, cups his hands to drink / and believes what he has always told me: / Some springs never go dry" (19). "Ebbing & Flowing Springs" recalls Robert Frost's "Directive" to reinforce this claim to the power of place and story. The speaker recalls the secrets of the spring that ebbs and flows, and the poem closes with sudden understanding:

You reach for the dipper
that's gone, then

remember to use your hands
as a cup for the cold
that aches & lingers.
This is what you have come for.
Drink. (24)

Though selections from *Out in the Country* keep some emotional distance from the place, they also foreshadow Marion's vision of its promise.

In *Tight Lines*, the emotional distance is closing. For example, "Winter Watch" travels "backward toward a time when / memory is a scar cross- / stitching pain to joy, grief to loss / across a darkening valley...." to a place where "winter nails us in / between hearth & dark / corners where already / our stories grow too dark to tell" (34). And in "Dark Day," the memory brings sadness, but it is more importantly a factor in reckoning the man he has become: the "story I have come to," a "gathering of words, kindling & song, / a way to warm us / for the cold dark days / of this lingering weather" (37). It is fitting, then, that the poems in this selection present a stronger emphasis on the present. In *the present* a woman looks thankfully across the fields, "this land's corduroy, / an apron of brown / plowed fields..." ("The Farm Wife's Aubade," 30). In *the present*, love pushes the speaker toward elation in "By the Banks of the Holston": "for the dark loam of hidden coves, / for the river's shifting eddies & shoals, / let there be hosannas, / hosannas forever, / hosannas forever & ever" (28).

Poems from the suggestively titled *Vigils* continue as nature-oriented, imagistic pieces and brief, often extremely sparse, narratives. The section's showpiece, "Barsha Buchanan, 1859-1929," features the epigraph, "She kept the vigil" (48). In that poem, the protagonist is awaiting the return of her long-departed husband. But such a task of devotion falls naturally as well to one who embraces his native region and begins to identify with it. Though more contemporary in their settings, narratives such as "Nocturne: Rogersville, Tennessee, 1947" and "At the Wayside" are stories of the place itself, poems that focus primarily on events, secondarily on the poet's experience of them. The poet's vigil clearly extends to stories of a place that deserves to be recalled. But over half of these pieces are imagistic observations of nature, clearly in the present, recalling Marion's earlier poems, so the speaker is also "keeping watch" over these natural phenomena. Poems in *Vigils* seem both to recall Marion's foundational work and to foreshadow poems to come.

Though they continue Marion's narrative strain, poems from *Lost & Found* seem immediately different. More than the poems from *Vigils*, they seem grounded not in some general "way it was" or even in "the way it is," but in particular events of the speaker's personal history—a *particular* memory of homemade fireworks ("Christmas Fireworks, 1948," 63), a *particular* day when his father "cradled [a hummingbird's] body in his cupped / hands and breathed across the fine iridescent / chest and ruby throat" ("The Man Who Loved Hummingbirds," 67), a *particular* visit to the

father's grave ("A Visit to My Father's Grave in February," 80). Like many earlier poems, they are concerned with the passage of time, but the experience of the time is more personal. Happily, the workshop paradox proves again to be true: the more particular the event, the greater its potential to do what his earlier poems, and maybe all poems, try to do—connect the universal in the particular. That's the effect here.

Marion's line also improves in these selections. It's more conversational, less strained for effect. In addition, he introduces a three-tiered line (similar to that of the later William Carlos Williams) and uses it in seven of the 13 selections. Typical of the line's elegance is "The Wild Geese," a poem which nods appreciatively to Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole" while perfecting Marion's own tension between the conversational and the poetic. In this small masterpiece, the line serves equally well for description:

Morning arrives in September,
the mist already risen
from the river, and across

the cool blue distance
comes the call of wild geese... (76)

and for discourse:

"They're not afraid," you said,
and cradled one in your arms

so I might stroke its head.
You laughed and said,
"You have healing hands,"

I took your hands in mine,
but we both knew that summer day
I could not heal your cancer. (77)

If the selections from *Lost & Found* mark Marion's progress in prosody, narrative voice, and identification with his region, *The Chinese Poet Awakens* follows with his most apparent turning to a different voice, based in the merger of his unnamed persona with the "Chinese Poet." Yet the difference proves to be less substantive than the posture might imply. The primary effect of the new persona is to extend the range of readers' expectations, depending on their familiarity with Chinese poetry. "The Chinese Poet Discovers His Roots While Walking Along the Abandoned Roadbed" is typical of Marion's accomplishment:

Mountains rise above me
in this redbud-sprigged
drizzle of a day.

Shrugging their shoulders against gray,
they remember humpbacked rising
from the sea to sing one note,
so deep, so bass,
it says,
Brother. (98)

Two natural images, the mountain and the metaphorical whale, are portrayed in a timeless, spiritual connection, implying the unity of all things. Seeking wisdom, the poet then addresses the river and hears this reply: "Be still and know, says the everlasting silence" (98). Ironically, the river's response is from a tradition both Eastern and, by adoption, Western, and certainly common enough in Appalachia: Psalms 46:10. The Bible verse successfully demonstrates the inevitable convergence of the wisdom of the wise old poets of China and those of East Tennessee. Although enhanced by the new persona, these poems would be engaging if "East Tennessee Poet" replaced "Chinese Poet"; still, Marion has used one more technique to raise universals from a sea of particulars.

The selections from *Letters Home* also show the poet's formal progress. In the most ambitious piece, "She's Solid Gone: Farewell to the Dixie Queen Drive-In...," Marion reprises the three-tiered stanza introduced in *Lost & Found*, and here, too, it provides an effective framework to sustain a longer narrative (118). Most importantly, however, he demonstrates a new turn in syllabics: a seven-syllable line. This form provides a subtle, gratifying rhythm, and, we suspect, gives the poet a technical struggle that enhances creative invention—to which the poems in this section give convincing witness. Earlier poems made little mention of one particularly engaging element of the Appalachian experience: temporary displacement. Here he addresses that topic in varied settings of his own family history: two poems based on an uncle's separation from his family during WWI, and three others inspired by the poet's childhood experience in wartime Detroit and its enhancement of regional loyalty.

The less narrative poems, too, are grounded in the speaker's past. Some, like "Milking," in which the speaker watches his blind grandmother milk a cow, are vividly drawn rural scenes, the appeal of which rests in their deftly evoked sensory images (111). Others sweep immediately beyond that particular. In "Remedy," for example, the speaker's Aunt Verdie uses a folk cure to ward off the child's whooping cough, while she remains helpless to cure her husband dying at home of tuberculosis (110). *Letters Home* completes the poet's progression from a more general Appalachian experience into the very stuff of his personal history, the ties with family and place and experience.

The *New Poems* continue with the excellences of *Letters Home* and push them to a higher level of refinement. Most are brief narratives which keep their focus on a single, specific incident. Marion frequently maintains the seven-syllable line, though never with rigidity. He has clearly

discovered a flexible formal vehicle that enhances his voice. When he chooses, he can keep the syllabic perfect, as in "Silo" (130) and "The Arbor" (150), but he can also loosen it, as in "Airborne," allowing it to vary and even drop completely in the second of the poem's three parts, so that only the readers' memory of the form persists (128). "Companion," a more radical and interesting variation, begins with eight lines of five syllables each, then allows the line to swell into sixes and sevens as it progresses (148).

The brief narratives are complemented by a brace of sparsely written, imagistic nature poems. Such pieces, prevalent in the early books, were absent in *Letters Home*. In "Lightning Bugs" (144) and "Nocturnal" (145), Marion features the genre again, but with a difference: the poet introduces a strict, four-line stanza consisting of an eight-syllable line followed by three, four-syllable lines. For example, "What is the moon to an old man— / a white saucer, / spilled milk running / down the dark road?" ("Nocturnal," 145). These lines feel the influence of "The Chinese Poet," marrying as they do a sharply presented image with a human emotion via the most subtle suggestions.

An additional technical achievement, the poet's skill at closure, grows in this final section. He moves seamlessly from the particulars of incident to the final suggestion that lifts the poem from memory and craft into wisdom. A simple story of a boy pushing the ice down in the top of a rain barrel culminates in the "sibilant whish" of the ice layer rising, "water feathering over the sides, / breaking free to rise as rain again" ("Rainbarrels," 127), an image which carries, if not the hope of resurrection, at least the wonder at the continuance of the natural cycle. A description of his parents' old recordings ends with the "dance / of then to the dust of now" ("78 RPM," 132). An ode to Lena Collins's "Stack Cake" ends with "a year's bounty / mixed into a morning's baking, / this gift bearing the sweet / savor of time's many layers" (133).

The strengths of the earlier work edge more closely toward perfection in the *New Poems*. The distance that pervaded the early work has dissolved into a full identification between the poet and his place, its natural and human phenomena. Therefore, when he writes about even the most intimate aspects of personal experience, he is writing about his region. While Marion may have begun as a self-consciously Appalachian poet, he has grown—through craft and practice, through long familiarity and deep love—into a poet of Appalachia. He has nurtured a relationship with his region that assures a practical integrity of craft and theme.

The arrangement and proportion of *Ebbing & Flowing Springs* suggests that we should read Marion primarily as a poet. This observation is not a criticism of his prose; on the contrary, Marion's publisher has done a service in making Marion's stories and essays easily available, and the collection itself creates unique gratifications. After studying the poems in the first three-quarters of the collection, reading the prose is like

visiting the poet's homeplace. Marion's fiction seems most engaging as it interacts with and informs the poems. To read a poem such as the "Rambling Rose" (17), then to have the characters re-appear with fuller characterizations in the story "Wildflowers" (153) a few reading hours later—then to read the poem once again—is a fascinating experience that suggests all sorts of questions about fictional worlds and intertextual realities. The same could be said of the relationship between the story "Wayside Diner" (172) and the poem "At the Wayside" (44). The stories tend to address in direct detail the themes the poems suggest.

The essays may be understood intertextually as well. In a score of poems, we encounter the speaker's father; when we go with the father and son to deliver a "Christmas Basket," the pen-and-ink sketch becomes a portrait (210). Perhaps the most accomplished prose piece, though, is "By the Banks of the Holston: Memories of a River," a set of narratives and lyrical reflections given unity by the Holston River, Marion's experience of it, and his family's long relationship to it (191). By the time we've finished the poems, we're aware of the poet's love for the Holston; but the essay demonstrates the depth and breadth of the relationship. Marion's attention to the river becomes a synecdoche for his relationship with his region. Not surprisingly, the essay works through image and suggestion, rather like a poem. Regardless of the genre, Marion is a poet as essentially as he is an Appalachian.

In his introduction to the volume, the poet details the significance of a cupboard built by his great-grandfather and his satisfaction that the first word his grandmother taught him to spell was *cupboard* (xvi). The book's final essay describes the poet's delight in his own grandchild's words of promise: "Water everywhere!" (218). Such a frame suggests the importance of delight in words, in families, and in our responsibility to nurture these rivers, to present to our offspring the river "of life into words, of words into stories, of stories that are our lifeblood, the flow of time past into the present" (219). In *Ebbing & Flowing Springs*, Marion has done just that.

WILLIAM JOLLIFF

William Jolliff grew up on a farm just outside Magnetic Springs, Ohio. He currently chairs the Department of Writing and Literature at George Fox University. His poems, articles, and reviews have appeared widely in literary journals.