

Voices in a New England Landscape

by
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Rev. of Westport Soundings, by Alan Powers. Box 3935 Westport MA 1994. 68 pages. Paper. \$7.95.

Alan Powers, whose historical study of the non-literary uses of books appears elsewhere in this issue, is also the author of a recent little book of witty poems, Westport Soundings. Since earning his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, Powers has taught for a quarter century in Fall River, Mass., an hour south of Boston, where artists try to rescue abandoned textile mills, tourists celebrate Lizzie Borden Days, and the locals unconsciously rhyme "potato" with "later." He lives, however, in Westport, a rural community half an hour farther down the shore.

Most of the poems are short, dramatic monologues, an ideal choice for Powers's wry humor and careful ear for voices. The characters who speak from these poems represent all sorts and conditions of New Englanders. A self-serve gas station cashier groans about demanding customers who can't pump gas, and the distracted customers complain of the cashier's inattention. A seventeenth-century Jesuit complains that the Hurons call him Pumpkin Head, while the Hurons stand amazed that a treaty asks them to forfeit the clean elk and deer of the forest in order to keep filthy pigs near their homes. Nursing home residents aching with nostalgia suffer buzzing television noise. Joseph Kennedy watches Eisenhower's funeral and thinks of his dead sons. Glenn Miller's dog knows the best of 'bones. An Amherst College student briefly, eternally hears JFK praise Robert Frost. It is an updated Spoon River Anthology of Massachusetts.

Some voices are respectful parodies: Emily Dickinson considers nuclear bombs and laments a dead cat. Others are translations from classical writers: Powers gives Catullus' tender epitaph, Martial's vituperative epigrams, and Horace's informal ode a rural Massachusetts accent as "branches yield their burdens, icy / rivers harden, freezing wicked." Powers even translates the winter

voices of birds: the Titmouse screams

"Cheater, cheater," to his brother.
How they flit and taunt each other!

While the owl
At moonrise barks huh, huh, huhoo,
his cold cold note. O great Horned Who,
Huh, huh, huhoo.

In "Lai D'Iris," my favorite poem, Powers assumes the voice of the poet-naturalist as he catalogues and commands the flora of a New England summer landscape:

The ox-eyed daisies follow purple
Loosestrife, Joe-Pye Weed and dock,
Berries manifold, black or wine-
Berries, raspberries gone by,
But blue (wild ones) on mountainsides
in Richmond near to Tanglewood.
Now August's spiky thistle, sting-
Ing horse nettles, and rods on rods
Of goldenrod—the steeple kind, or
Cantilevered, the Thai dancer type—
Nodding, waving. These I've seen
Without a name; now they come
When I call them to this poem.

Linguistically rich yet accessible to students from junior high age upward, Westport Soundings is a source of pleasure for any reader, and a delicious counterpart to the Midwestern voices, histories, and landscapes we Minnesotans too often take to be universal.