

Charles L. Bartow. *Dust and Prayers: Poems*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009. 86 pages. \$12.00

Lynn Domina, ed. *Poets on the Psalms*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2008. 304 pages. \$15.56

Junior high school literary hermeneutics: I'm a poet and I know it; I can tell by my feet - they're long fellows. My 8 D's suggest that I am not a poet. Therein is the proof under which I have long labored. Reviewing these two books has been a stretch. Reading C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* has helped considerably, but not nearly enough. Apparently I am not wired to really enjoy poetry either as a reader or as a writer. Billy Collins is the only poet I have been able to warm up to. But I have found significant value in exploring these two books. The first, by preacher and homiletics teacher Charles Bartow, is a collection of poems written over a period of years. The second is a diverse collection of reflections by poets on the psalms, edited by Lynn Domina.

Bartow's poems come in various forms, lengths, and moods. They include dedications to family members, colleagues, and friends; they include theological reflections on mundane as well as world-shattering events. Referring to Aristotle's *The Rhetoric* and *The Poetics*, Bartow observes in an introductory chapter that the "rhetor intends to teach, to delight, to persuade. But the poet, like the preacher, attests a happening." Preaching is more than making a case or an argument; it is to create experience.

While it is fair to infer that I just do not "get" poetry, I do get the love and care with which poets deploy their words. For that I am grateful to Bartow and many other poets. It is clear that they linger over their words, choosing just the right one to achieve or attest a happening. Rather than simply shoveling more words toward the idea with the hope of clarity, they select words on a more judicious basis. Language has become cheap. Words have become trinkets. In a time in which language has become trivialized and even traumatized, it is heartening to read the work of those for whom language is significant and for whom words are sacred and not to be used without care and caution. Would that more preachers took such interest, not just in ideas, but in words: their beauty, rhythm, sound, and creative power. I found it enlightening to discover this previously unknown (to me) perspective on the author's work with words.

On a different note, Domina's collection of essays is stimulating. A wide range of poets, topics, and perspectives is represented in these essays. I did not know of any of the poets prior to reading this book. Of course, they could all be highly respected; I would not know. But I found their opinions and insights provoked my thinking about the Psalms. They opened fresh perspectives and possibilities. The poets examined the psalms as poetry, not as canonical literature. They had fewer parameters and operating assumptions in place as they engaged the psalms. Carl Phillips observes, "Psalms is arguably the most human book of the Old Testament because the psalms spring entirely from a human inability to accept the possibility of God as merciless and responsive only to a will or plan of his own." Jill Alexander Essbaum claims that the "Psalms belong to anyone who accepts the call to live a fully human life in the hopes that despite it...someone so great as the king of the universe would have her to be his own." Enid Dame writes, "The power of the Psalms lies in their ability to reach out to us down through the

centuries, to assure us that another person has experienced profound sorrow, betrayal, or illness and has captured this experience in startlingly precise language and imagery.”

In particular, the essays acknowledge a broad range of emotions in the psalms, part of which seems to have been bracketed off for liturgical use because the emotions are too stark, too accusatory of God. Whether treating particular psalms or collections of psalms, authors regularly made this observation. Psalm 23 was examined by several of the authors. As but one example Diane Glancy writes, “All of Psalms seems to be a divided highway. Cries of agony and desperate pleas for help mixed with continuous, profound praise of the Lord’s faithfulness.” Worth the read alone was my re-discovery that as a preacher I can employ with much greater effectiveness those psalms that voice emotions and concerns that I may be too timid to utter on my own.

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