

WAYWORN WOODEN FLOORS by MARK LAVORATO. Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, 2012. <http://porcupinesquill.ca>

Mark Lavorato, who calls himself a professional nomad, is the author of two novels: *Veracity* (2007) and *Believing Cedric* (2011). *Wayworn Wooden Floors* is his first poetry collection, and contains poems about nature, flora and fauna, wood, song, love, patriotism, colour, travel, people and foreign countries. He relies on his skills as a novelist, musician and photographer in this poetry collection. Raised on the Canadian Prairies, he spent most of his life traveling through Central and North America, the Caribbean and Europe. The scenery he witnessed and the townspeople he met along the way inspired him to write. Several of the poems are based on stories he heard during his travels.

Wayworn Wooden Floors came out of Lavorato's thousand-kilometre trek through exotic locales. What strikes me about this book is the unusual title. The word "wayworn," according to the Random House Dictionary, means worn or weary from travel. The many references to worn out wood and wooden floors may be a metaphor for his weariness. Wooden floors eventually wear out but they can be restored with varnish and nails. A healthy person can also be restored with rest and food when he is exhausted, as the poem "This World" tells us:

*Wayworn wooden floors lie
as if in wait for the dust to settle... ...the ancient boards
trail a familiar sound, creak and bend
like some weathered song...*

This theme of wayworn wooden floors is picked up in subsequent poems. For example:

*...The planks are weathered and grey, given
to singing fingers with a sliver when dragging
over the wood to brush away fallen leaves or pips*

A 19th century engraving in the early pages of the book denotes play, thinking, and creativity the way Lavorato's poetry also relies on play – with words and metaphoric language:

*I am stuck to you
like the stamp on an envelope
of one of those letters we write and never send
licked with a teary tongue
and slapped onto the corner with reckless abandon
that decayed as fast as courage...*

He gives human qualities to inanimate objects:

We notice the clouds for the first time in weeks

*tugging across the sky
craning their necks to look down
or up...*

Even the trees have lives of their own:

*And the trees seem to stop and hang in the air
as if they're waiting for something....*

I was particularly moved by the poem "Swallow." Some Christian paintings use swallows to symbolize saved souls. To sailors, a swallow represents approaching shore. To me, the swallow personifies freedom from oppression. The lines in the poem, arranged in a zig-zag pattern, mirror a bird flying, and reinforce the theme of freedom:

*Fists of scrub shaking at the sand
of a waterless beach
wide as an ocean
buckling its grainy folds
into silken shadows
It's only the odd insect rustling
the air that she lives on
dreaming in shivering time-lapse
of her nesting place...*

Throughout the book, Lavorato plays with a variety of forms, giving readers an opportunity to be active as well as passive recipients of his words. We are never complacent and he is not predictable. "Janitor," for example, written as a prose poem without punctuation, challenges the reader's imagination:

*it's not a great job he knows what with
the meager pay and surface area
of a gymnasium having to wax the
floors run a dusting rag over and
under the book boxes on the pews not...*

His frank, unpretentious and clear language is accessible to all. Readers can open to any page and enjoy the flowing musical verses. His background as a composer is revealed in several of the poems, including "True Patriot Love":

*A rhythm that is crude and earnest...
and chords from the old country...

as if they were tightening baffles
of an accordion...
And it is this song*

*this song
that is infinitely
more
beautiful
than the one we know*

His vivid description of his father's Alzheimer's disease in the poem "Vertigine: In Memory of Alfonso Lavorato" is so touching it reminded me of my own mother who died of dementia. The language jumps off the page. It is so evocative it is almost possible to hear the shrieks and the cries:

*Whenever they move him
he screams
body tensed...*

*An efficient whirl of hands replaces diapers, new sheets,
pull, tuck, continence pad, catheter insertion,
swap glistening bag for empty one...*

*Tracing his long path to the ground
with a shriek that
claws at the wind...*

In the longest poem, "Fingerpaintings," Lavorato builds his stanzas around fragments of nursery rhymes:

...it would seem that

It's raining

outside,

the wet roads doubling every brake light that slows...

He's only here till he finds a place,

Until then it seems

It's pouring

over childhood

memorabilia and yearbook regrets...

while

The old man

is watching television

in a volume that rattles the cabinets, the screen burning...

...as well, it would seem, as the fact that she

is snoring

As a poem, “Harbour Seal” seems unfinished, as if the poet wants readers to continue his journey in their own way. Interestingly, the poem ends without a period:

*...a phantom
world we'll never understand, and yet is close enough
that we can dip a part of ourselves into, as if with
the feeble and sinking effort of trying to reach across*

These 91 pages are filled with imagery, thought, tongue-in-cheek humour, and movement. The poems bristle with life. Their varied length and shape offer up an element of surprise, tension and resolution as if we were listening to a musical concerto or symphony. “I Used to Believe” closes the collection aptly:

*It's true. There really was a time
when I believed that the last
word of a poem was where it
ended.*

But now he knows better. It is only the beginning.

Reviewed by Carol Katz, emerging writer and amateur guitarist,
Cote St. Luc, Quebec, August 21, 2012

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