

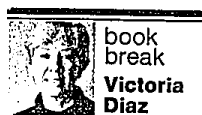
'Imaginary Paintings' stirs eerie emotional feelings

ALTHOUGH I've written some poems, and even seen some of them published, I certainly don't consider myself a poet. Still less do I see myself as a poetry scholar or "critic."

Simply as an individual reader of poetry, though, I'd like to make some comments on an exciting collection of poems I came across recently. The newly published collection is "Imaginary Paintings" (Paris Review, \$7.95). The poet is Charles Baxter, a professor at the University of Michigan, who is known chiefly for his short story collections, "Harmony of the World," and "Through the Safety Net," and a 1987 novel, "First Light."

It isn't often I come across a collection of contemporary poetry I can call "exciting." In fact, it isn't often today that I can across an individual poem I can say that about.

WITH FEW exceptions — I usual-



book
break
**Victoria
Diaz**

ly like William Stafford's works, some of James Dickie's and a handful of Plath poems appeal to me, along with the work of a few minor poets. I find most contemporary poetry I read to be considerably disappointing.

This happens, usually, for one of two reasons: either I find the work inaccessible or, if it's accessible, the poet simply doesn't seem to be "talking" to me at all. Reading it is a little like plodding through gallery after art gallery, always hopeful, but finding that almost every canvas appears to be blank.

Then, I happen upon something like "Imaginary Paintings" (Imaginary Press, \$7.95). It's a collection of poems, for example, Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks."

What Baxter writes about is American culture, complacency, hopelessness — what he calls "an attitude."

"ALSO, IN 'Imaginary Paintings,' I wanted to create images that might have been paintings, but weren't," he said. "Some poems were 'descriptions' of paintings, but they also deal with the social times in which the painting was created."

According to James Linville, an editor at Paris Review, Baxter's poems "transform the details of midwestern landscape, intimate domestic taboos, and the experience of art into a vision that is... deeply into the American grain."

Even with such mundane images as shopping malls, expressways,

apartment buildings and the like, there is a strange, almost ghostly "feel" to these poems. (In fact, Baxter, in talking about the poems, has said "I wanted them to not only have a sort of precision like Edward Hopper's art, but also that eerie 'feel.'")

Something seems to have happened in Baxter's landscape, and we find ourselves in a kind of terrible "aftermath" where "something immense is missing" and one wonders, on a summer afternoon, "Is it cold on the rings of Saturn? As cold as here?"

HERE, THERE IS "closeness without intimacy" and an odd kind of paralysis. Limbs are often immobilized or "frozen" or "deadened." People are "propped up" like dolls or puppets and perceive their own bodies merely "as a collection of parts."

The sky threatens to fall, and the

earth is strewn with broken things: stones, vessels, glass, mountains, the country, the moon. Even the light is broken, in this world of strange blue skies, explosions, windstorms, orange clouds, sagging trees, corroded metals, and lethal haze. Often, the inhabitants appear doomed in an isolation from which they are either unable or unwilling to reach out ("I'll keep myself secret").

"The Passionate Shopping Mall" is a chilling place where "the teenagers kissing each other didn't exactly want to, but went on because someone told them." Outside "The Slow Classroom," people are "busy making themselves into blurs." The Hopperesque "Pineapple Cafe" has about it "that unpleasant dollhouse feeling" and inside it, "No one recognizes anyone."

Definitely, this is not "pretty" or "happy" poetry. But Baxter's startling vision, inventive images, and the arresting depth of the collection

relieve the somberness of the theme. And, at one point, a possible route to redemption is glimpsed: "Let us rise up, let us throw off the snow from our lips, let us breathe in suffering and exhale charity."

BAXTER WORKED on the collection, which is a rather sizable one (almost 50 poems are included) for more than 10 years, and a number of poems were published along the way in such literary journals as the "Anchor Review," "Northwest Review" and "Poetry."

"As I write," Baxter said, "I don't really think of an explicit audience. I just try to make a poem an object of meaning for me and as many readers as possible. I know that people don't want 'sermons.' I know they won't read that. But it's OK for poets to be a little upsetting, I think."

Victoria Diaz is a free lance writer/reviewer who lives in Livonia.

briefly speaking

• Cabaret concert

Reservations are now being taken for the Livonia Symphony's annual Cabaret Concert at 7 p.m. Saturday, April 7, beginning with snacks at 7 p.m. Music begins at 8 p.m. For information regarding reservations of tables of eight and 10, call Betty Jean Awrey, 522-1100, Ida Krande at 851-4524, or the symphony Hotline, 422-8990. Tickets are \$10.

• All Sung in His Name Concert

Five choirs will participate in the vocal/instrumental concert at 2:30 p.m. Sunday in St. Maurice Catholic Church, 32765 Lyndon Livonia. Participating will be St. Maurice Contemporary Choir, St. Ives Contemporary Ensemble, Ted Thomas Ensemble (black gospel), Cherry Hill Brothers (barbershop/gospel) and the Max Davey Singers, contemporary/traditional music.

There is no charge for the program being arranged by St. Maurice choir director Joe Podorski.

• Poland exhibit

Photographs taken by Livonia residents Jane and Ed Wagon are on exhibit in the Livonia City Hall lobby through Friday, March 30. The exhibit features 38 photographs the couple took last year to the country where both their parents were born and some relatives still live. There is no admission charge. Viewing hours coincide with normal city hall business hours.

• Youth Philharmonic

The Livonia Youth Philharmonic of Michigan

will hold a concert at 1 p.m. Saturday, March 24, in the First Congregational Church of Wayne, on Michigan Avenue corner of Wayne Road.

The string orchestra will perform music by Mozart, Bourree, by Bach, Miniature Dance Suite by Gibbs, and Handel. The Philharmonic Orchestra will perform Dvorak's Symphony No. 4 in G Major and Mozart's Overture to the Magic Flute.

Admission is \$4 for adults and \$2 for students. Tickets will be available at the door. For more information, call Lois Gilmore, 453-8887.

• Madonna film series

Madonna College will present "The Day They Robbed the Bank of England," starring Peter O'Toole, as part of the Humanities Film Series, at 1:30 p.m. and again at 7:30 p.m. Friday, March 23 in Kresge Hall. Free admission. Madonna is located at I-96 and Levan Road in Livonia.

• Art of the Flower

Henry Ford Community College will present "Art of the Flower," an exhibit of paintings by a series of artists, March 8-30 in the Sisson Gallery of the Fine Arts Center, Henry Ford Community College.

Featured artists are: Mary Aro, Vicki Brett, Mary Jane Bigger, Electric Stamelos, Michael Mahoney, Maria Myle, Shirley Parish, Jim Pajkowski and Robert Corder, HFCO art instructor. Exhibit hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Tuesday and Thursday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Explore variety of light sources

A. We're trying to get as much information as we can before completing our plans for a new home. Although we're attracted to a sense of openness and light that large windows offer, we're also concerned we might be getting too much of a good thing. What advice can you give that takes a lot of natural light into consideration, particularly as it will influence the interior planning and the color of furnishings?

A. If you have any say in the matter, first try to establish the orientation of the house on its lot to take best advantage of the sun's radiation. Ideally, for this climate, the length of the house should be on an east-west axis, so that the broadest areas face north and south. What this does in winter is to allow the south wall maximum exposure to the sun; and in summer the minimum exposure for the east-west walls.

Even if you are unable to achieve this ideal alignment, there are other things you can take into consideration that will help you control the effects of a lot of natural sunlight. Depending upon the style of your home, plan on a roof overhang. Recognize that careful positioning of trees and landscaping will affect the quality of reflective light into the interior of your home.

Explore the variety of Thermopane windows, including the argon gas injected types as well as the film coatings to help reduce ultraviolet and infrared causes of fading and discoloration of interior furnishings.

For the brightest exposures, be aware that sheer curtains become the vehicle for extending light into the interior. Consider the use of various types of louvers, including horizontal or vertical blinds, depending upon the high or low angle of the sun, for the windows in question.

Although air conditioning will control the actual temperature, the quality of light from the different exposures will nonetheless influence the perception of warmth or coolness. How you respond to light from different exposures has a lot to do with your individual disposition.

Morning people, for example, love the clarity of the early sun. It's appropriate that they enjoy having their kitchen or bedroom with an eastern exposure, decorated with clear, fairly bright colors. There are those who live and work most comfortably in the environment of cool, even light that the northern exposure offers. For those who find this light too cool, brighter, lighter colors should be used as compensation.

The western exposure, the direction of the setting sun with its



all about color
**Helen Diane
Vincent**

subdued light, is best served by clear and balanced color harmonies for those who enjoy the twilight zone. Finally, the southern exposure, which receives considerable overall radiation and light, can best accommodate the widest range of colors, both bright or grayed, dark or light, cool or warm, with perhaps a greater emphasis on the cooler shades. It's the exposure for those who enjoy activity as in a family room.

For each exposure, there's considerable leeway in the use of favorite colors.

Q. We want to transform our entire attic into usable, living space, but the slant of the roof and the position of the windows low to the floor are offering us problems. Large, exposed wood beams, spaced quite far apart, emphasize the slant. We don't know whether we should treat this as if it was a ceiling, or consider it a part of the short, vertical wall where the windows are located? What part can color play in this situation?

A. I would recommend incorporating as much soft blue or blue greens as possible for all of the wall surfaces because these colors psychologically and optically convey a sense of distance and space. If you are thinking of using wallpaper, choose a subtle all-over or vertical pattern to optically "straighten out" the angle of the roof.

Paint the wood beams white, or the lightest background color of the wallpaper pattern. Then install a brass ceiling fan with light fixtures to help distract from the low-positioned windows. Anchor the angled space and the color scheme with a patterned rug in deep reds of cinnamon and apricot colors.

Make sure your furniture is light in scale and neutral in color. Accent the entire scheme with a touch of lemon yellow in accent pillows or accessories. Avoid drawing attention to the windows and use the minimum of covering for them. If you try something like this for your attic, you'll have a pleasant and livable space.

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