Two Poems by John Reibetanz

Ashbourn Changes: The Bell Ringer

These great bells in their ringing rock the towers
That scarcely can contain them, and each village
Swells with the harmony of drifting sound.
We move to a precision in their changes:
   An order comes before the echoes
And the heart holds it when all sound has passed.

This hour's new life consorts with hours passed
In older lives resounding with the tower's
Familiar music, and each cadence echoes
Memories in the houses of my village
   As generations hear their changes
Grow part of a community of sound.

Labouring men grew silent at the sound
When bells tolled out the years of one who passed
Beyond green hopes of spring and winter's changes;
They ploughed and never sought to ask why towers
   Should sing time's harrowing the village
And celebrate its grey harvest of echoes.

Yet April's joy in permutation echoes
As one with my heart's rhythm as I sound
Primary sequences that every village
Ringing man knows bring exultation past
   The call of seasons—Eden towers
Over a body rocked by sharing changes,
And will not fall: no headlong nightmare changes
This elemental beat to fitful echoes
Or dims the repercussions of our towers.
Yet one thought shadows them: what if the sound
Which cradled action in our past
Should fail to carry meaning for the village?

Towers are singing trees, rooted in village
Harmonies, the bedrock beneath earth’s changes.
Men will forget their foothold in the past,
Toss on the wind, and roar against its echoes;
    But harmony grows where present sound
Takes root in time, as in the song of towers.

Let every village answer to the echoes
Rung by these changes as their climbing sound
Spires from the past like ivy round our towers.

Roger Foster Recalls the Miller

His whole body was attuned to the breezes.
Wind shifting in the middle of the night
Woke him; he could even sense the tide
Turn on the coast, a dozen miles off.

A master sailor whose landlocked craft
Was all circles—the sweeps, the stones,
The tower itself—and his white wake
A stream of flour that coursed from the furrows.

The stream dried up on days the sails
Met nothing to wrestle with; only their crossed
Shadow moved through the afternoon
Slowly changing angles on the hillside.
Then, at evening, when the wind spoke up,
And the fantail swung the sails in answer,
He guided their whispers through the ripe silence
Like a scythe, and brought the harvest home.

One night I heard the wind rise
To a roar, and knew he'd need my help
To keep a steady flow of grain
Lest the dry runner be blown to bits.

That was a rum wind: it hissed
Through the ash, and made thick beech boughs flap;
As I neared the hilltop, coppiced oak
Snapped like matches all around me.

Lightning flickered about the cap,
And the swish of the sails drowned in thunder;
Great clots of owls' nest and thatch, ripped
From the miller's house, pitched to the ground.

I saw him through the small light
Of a hurricane lantern—sweat streamed
And made his face give back the light
As I told him what the wind was doing.

He said, "They'd've done well to build
The house round as the tower; we'll lose
Our sails one of these days, like the ships,
But wind nor wet won't get a hold on us."

We worked all night: the oak shafts
Strained and groaned, but held, and the stones
Roared as they crushed the flow of grain,
Changing it, swelling the sacks with meal.

The storm blew itself out by morning.
Pale patches of unweathered straw
Where wind had sheared off seasoned thatch
Left the house topped like a sick old man.
The air in the mill was half flour!
Now I could hear us breathe it in,
Our bodies tired, the wheels quiet
Where we had captured something of the wind.

It’s all quiet now, even
The rats have quit the rotting timbers;
The sails long gone, nothing to show
Why someone once piled stone so high.

The wind blows over and around the tower,
Beyond hurt or help. Most
Of those its meal nourished are dead,
And I am left with a useless craft.

Yet, who’d call my inheritance poor?
He taught me how to live by taking
Where taking and giving become one:
Wind nor wet won’t get a hold on that.