

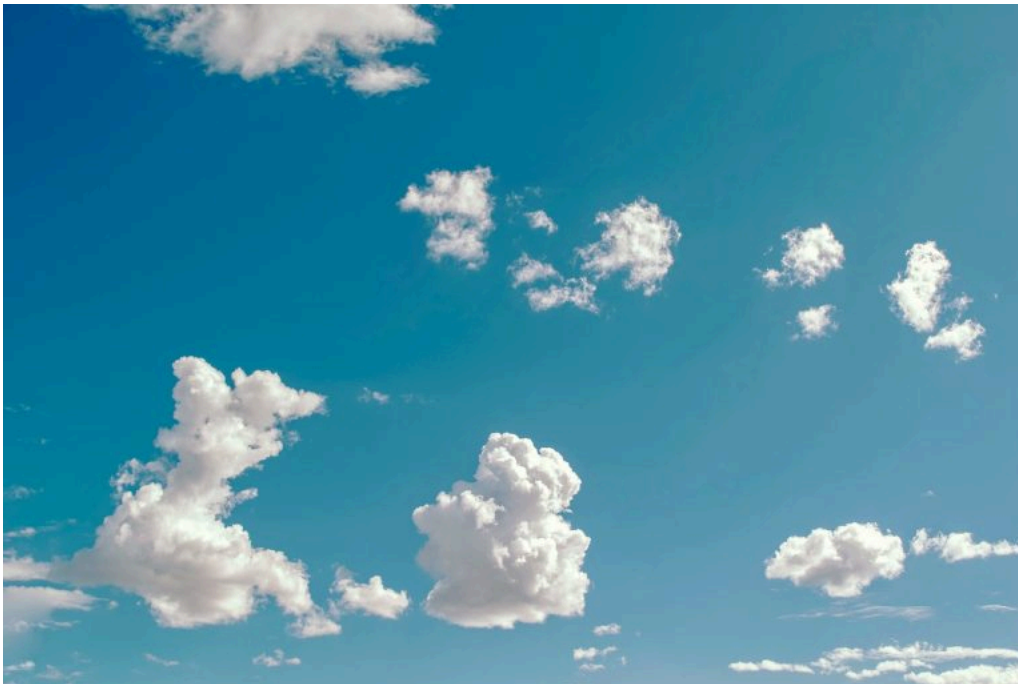
Close Reading

April 28, 2025

Essays

Air and Aging: Murray Bodo's new poems

By Peggy Rosenthal



Murray Bodo is a Franciscan priest—and author of twenty-four books. Twelve are prose, largely about St. Francis, St. Clare, and Franciscan spirituality; twelve are poetry. His newest collection of poems—the twelfth—is *Brother Wind and Air: A*

Lifetime in Verse, just published by Franciscan Press.

Bodo is now in his eighties, but in this new collection his creative mind is as rich and fertile as ever—as it ranges over such subjects as favorite museums; Easter, Christmas, and other seasons; his New Mexico childhood, his travels, his aging.

In his Introduction to the book, Bodo writes:

The poet Robert Frost called a poem, “a momentary stay against confusion.” And it is for that “momentary stay” that I have continued to write poems for over 70 years, even though I’ve doubted along the way; and in my early 80’s, I wondered if I had run out of momentary stays, if I would now no longer experience the joy of discovery that a poem is. I feared that I would no longer be able to write something that I thought couldn’t be said any other way than in the short lyric poems I was used to writing. And so I paused and instead of feeling there was no more to say, the first poem in this book came to me almost as if something inside me began to answer my own question, and the first lines of the poem, “Fountain Pen,” began to flow onto the page.

I feel, these days, a distance
 I fear is age intruding,
 its voice needy, insistent:
 “Rest. Pull back, Let God find you.”

The poem continues:

And so I do, but you keep
 receding, a stranger, it
 seems, to the heart’s surrender –
 until I turn to the stilled pen.

Closed, it lies unmoving where
 I left it in search of you
 who will come, age says, if only
 I let go, let you surprise me.

Then when I open the pen, you
 are there, silent, waiting for me
 to hold you, let you let your
 still voice find the waiting words.

I find it delightful that Bodo's poetry-writing inspiration returned via a fountain pen. And it's appropriate that he places this poem first in the book—because one of his favorite subjects in this volume is indeed the writing of poetry itself. Take “Of Birds and Poems”:

That is the way with poems
and birds: they catch us by
surprise and then fly away
when we try to pin them down.
Wings, not repose, define them.

Or “Poets”:

Some said it could not be said
so they said a poem instead
which said what could not be said

And, perhaps natural for a poet, Bodo writes also about the wonders of language. In the book's section entitled simply “WORDS,” we get titles like “Glossary for a Theology,” “Abstract,” and “Late Autumn Song” (with its refrain of “I lay the words down”).

Throughout this collection, a motif is the marvel of making poems out of the insubstantial: that is, out of wind and air. As Bodo writes in his headnote to the book's final section: “In the writing of these poems wind and air became something substantial that I had to embrace as St. Francis did and make air my brother.” So there's the poem “Wind and Air,” which begins:

Wind different from air is
God's breath at the beginning

setting ordinary air to
music that sets plants dancing.

And in “Breath Air (Ruah)” we get

The sound of air is a music...

Ruah, God's Spirit, air, breath
 Song begins with air blown out
 a propulsive single note...

In the poem "Walking," the air motif joins with another of the volume's major themes: Bodo's aging.

I am older, now aging
 making walking slower
 but still assuaging...

This walking is not from or to
 but proof of life, of movement
 going out of yourself toward you

filling your lungs with freeing
 air, finding your own rhythm
 a kind of kinetic breathing

And the poem "Thin Air" moves from a Gospel allusion (the stone closing Jesus's tomb being rolled away)—

But how can you fit into thin air –
 like the small rush of air
 when a rock has been rolled back

—to Bodo's own aging:

In old age I am beginning to see
 poems are my way into thin air.

They are the thin air where
I find you weighted words

that are mostly still silent,
weightless, heavy in thin air.

There are many more poems with “Air” in the title—yet, paradoxically, all are grounded: whether in song, or dance, or fishing, or walking, and more.

What I treasure about all the poems in this volume is that they’re fully accessible yet full of life’s wonders and mysteries.

Reader, you are in for a treat.

Peggy Rosenthal has a PhD in English Literature. Her first published book was Words and Values, a close reading of popular language. Since then she has published widely on the spirituality of poetry, in periodicals such as America, The Christian Century, and Image, and in books that can be found [here](#).

Tags: [Christianity](#), [Peggy Rosenthal](#), [poetry](#).

Share Post

Related “Close Reading” Posts