

Edible Thistles
poems, stories and essays

by Joshua Wait

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INTRODUCTION

To read this book of poems and essays is to enter an aesthetic that interweaves observation, recollection, and reflection. This poet sees and listens to family, community, the natural world, and art.

Joshua Wait is a witness and stenographer to the pain and wonder of others. His five senses are hyper-attuned and empathic.

“Waves of Corn” is a sensory feast that captures one complete lifetime in a few sumptuous, delicious lines while “Edible Thistles” circumnavigates the globe only to discover how foreign and exotic are our minds and memories.

The poems, “Barbara” and “Steve,” among others, take note of souls we mostly do not see, people literally “unremarkable” until Wait, in a kind of poetic ministry, pays attention and then pens a parable for each.

The poems of the Plein Air section of the book are both delicate and resilient in their imagery. They bear not only the weight of cloud, tree, hill, sky, but also the heft of remembrance and realization. “Art Lecture, Spring 1988” is a quicksilver examination of art criticism while “The Long Hike” is a seriocomic meditation on mortality.

Clues to the cosmology of Wait’s writing can be found in his essays. The painters he chooses to study reveal the worldview he is trying to assemble and practice. In the essay, “Seeing the Ordinary,” he writes, “It’s a challenge to be highly attuned to one’s own personal experience and find a way to express that experience to another.” In the same essay, he looks for “the preservation of a feeling and a space within one’s self for artistic expression.” And when he writes of the artist Morandi’s subtle artwork we perceive Wait’s own longing for a clearing “that allows the mind to see the ordinary and feel a moment of calm.”

In an over-stimulated contemporary world, how does a poet so busy in his life as husband, father, son, brother, neighbor, and citizen circumscribe a space of quiet light for contemplation? Wait finds it where he can—on a street or a sidewalk, in a kitchen or on a trail in a nature preserve. By his openness to an almost sublime sense of seeing and experience he sketches for us a pathway to a reality shaded with meaning and beauty.

Lynn Lohr

Former Director of the Minnesota Poets
in the Schools program

WAVES OF CORN

The quaking of corn never left you. Waves of it,
sound of soft slithering ears all summer long.

Riding on a trolley through Oakland, weary
from work at the hospital, rocking gently, shadows
would bring back memories of corn waving over head
as you lay in the field as a child hiding from your brother.
The best ears, half the size of your arm. "You, no you,"
you'd say. "I want you." A basket full of your catch fresh
from the crisp green ocean growing in the humid haze.
Chatter about the kitchen table, adults
discussing news of what's selling, what's not,
and for how much. Waves of it. It was a noise
like frogs roaring in the night or crickets
under the window sill. An irritation and a lullaby.
Crisp tearing leaves would join the chorus, impatient,
revealing sweet pearls, their milk on your fingers
from burst kernels. Freed from the strings of silk
twining your fingers, the corn would sigh in hot water.
Prairie lobster, sweet, fresh from the waves.

When you grew old, you could no longer see,
but you could reach out and feel the strands,
strands of a grandchild's hair and remember corn,
waves and waves of corn.

CROWS

Crows and crows and always crows
transecting telephone wires, an envelope opening,
two or three, then forty spinning, spinning,
spinning beads about a thread, feckless
dancing, sweeping pantomime about an ashy
acid sky, notes frozen, frozen in a line.

SEEING THE ORDINARY

Giorgio Morandi discovered new ways of seeing beauty through exploring endless nuances in tone. He chose ordinary objects like bottles, vases, and tins, often bought second hand, as the subject of his work. He arranged and rearranged them constantly in order to find a seemingly infinite variety of compositions. His paintings don't drift off into the sentimental. They don't rework nostalgic moments, invoke childhood memories, or awaken romantic passions. Instead, his paintings focus intently on ordinary objects as if he were seeing them for the first time.

His work contrasts with some of the more popular movements of the early twentieth century such as Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism. Cubism radically altered the viewing plane of an object through fractured perspective, Fauvism applied saturated colors with bold strokes, and Surrealism plumbed the depths of the unconscious. These avant-garde movements broke with the traditions of realism in order to explore new territory. And while French, German, and Spanish painters grabbed the attention of the world through their sensational work, Morandi, an Italian painter, worked diligently with subtlety and nuance to produce his images.

For hundreds of years, still life paintings traditionally depicted an object like a skull, a vase of flowers, or a platter of fruit against a dark background. The darkness caused the background to recede so that the foreground would come into focus. Van Gogh introduced blue and yellow backgrounds into his paintings of sunflowers. Cézanne experimented with line and color to re-envision the nature of still life paintings. These breaks with convention created new ways of seeing familiar subjects.

Morandi chose to transform mundane subjects into an experience of nearly endless possibilities. The vases and bottles in his paintings are more humble than the brilliant sunflowers in Van Gogh's work and are less inviting than the apples and pears in Cézanne's. Morandi avoided objects that would naturally call attention to themselves. The simplicity of the object allows us to focus on the effects of light rather than on the significance of the object. In the later paintings, a soft light immerses the objects and creates an almost boundless feeling of space. The images feel both expansive and intimate.

It's a challenge to be highly attuned to one's own personal experience and then find a way to express that experience to another person. One approach is to use symbols to mediate between the artist and the viewer. Frida Kahlo represented her personal experience of reality through symbols like a deer being shot through with arrows. The symbolic language of the image communicates her painful psychological reality. During the 17th century, Dutch artists used still life paintings to symbolize religious or moral meaning. For example, the objects in the *Vanitas* still life by Jacques de Gheyn represent human vanity in the face of death.

Morandi stated that the objects in his still life paintings have no symbolic meaning.

End of Sample