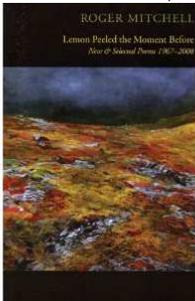


Recommended by Elaine Sexton

Lemon Peeled the Moment Before: New and Selected Poems 1967-2008, by Roger Mitchell (Ausable Press)

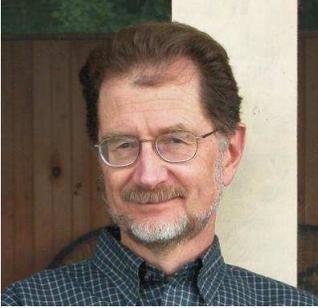
After reading a little “ditty,” a short poem with perfect pitch in Poetry magazine a few years ago, I set out to find more work by its maker, Roger Mitchell, finding a cache of his seamless and shapely poems and a new and selected collection in the offing with Ausable Press. Though Mitchell tends to favor a longer, more narrative structure, his 16-line “Fisherman’s Ditty,” included there, waves the flag of his disposition:

Goodbye to the little yard full of clover and crabgrass,
the sagging carport and the neighbors. Farewell to the rabbi
who ate nothing but pizza, to splitting wood in the driveway
on a portable stump, which the neighbors watched
from the shadows in back of their kitchens as I brought
the maul down on a life that was hardly a life at all
but a series of internal negotiations over which of us
put on the most orderly, incumbent trash of the week.
It was a life I asked for and loved and never knew why
it never seemed to be mine but a wave that washed over me,
my head full of voluptuous seaweed, shipwreck and foam.
Believe me, I love to lie here singing this fisherman’s ditty,
a bit of rope in my hands for practicing knots,
mind loosened by grog, whine of the squeezebox, wheeze
of the salts cantering out onto the deck under the stars.
Beneath the tune, unmistakable and huge, the sea’s heave.



An acute observer of the human condition Mitchell plucks at curious chords, choosing just the right deadpan particulars to make a taut song from “a life that was hardly a life at all.” A quiet intelligence is his armature, lifting “the sea’s heave” from the “whine of a squeezebox.”

A stand-out from the selected works is “Delicate Bait,” the title poem from his eighth full-length collection. The intimate becomes universal in sinuous detail, turning a meal shared between lovers into a thanksgiving: “That we should come / and go, eating the few thousand meals, / a few hundred fish, a room full of grains, / that we should put the world in our mouths / and swallow, become the fish, / the deer, the goat, the field of wheat, / walking graveyard with no stones, body of death / and the world.” The setting could be a Greek Isle or a waterside meal anywhere on earth, an anthem to a lifetime of meals, to being alive, manifest in, “I was here, and the fish/is a part of my body, and I thank/the fish and the cook and the person/who brought it to me and those/at the other tables making cairns/out of words and gestures,/glances in every direction.”



I'll admit to a bias in these examples. Rural America, rather than sea, form the backdrop for much of Mitchell's work. A 1988 collection has the simple title: *Adirondack*. The titles of his last four books illustrate the compression found in his best work: *Braid* (1997), *Savage Baggage* (2001), *Delicate Bait* (2003), *Half/Mask* (2007). *Lemon Peeled the Moment Before* offers selections from nine of his books and includes 29 new poems. In all, this poet's diction is plainspoken, finding the elegant in the ordinary. In another "new" poem, "Born Collector," he quotes a collector of bowling balls from text found in an exhibit catalogue: "Lots of anything is more interesting to me than one of anything." Mitchell tends to light small fires in his poems, and let go the sparks, in his own words: "I was a born collector. I did not choose to be one./ In the early days it was hairs from my father's chin." What to make of the gathered hairs from a father's chin? Here's where the art of collage meets poetry, is poetry, to take a found thing, a spent thing, and redeploy it to make art, something Roger Mitchell does with finesse.

[Published September 1, 2008. 230 pages. \$16.00 paperback]