

REVIEWS

*Luminous Debris: Reflecting on Vestige in Provence
and Languedoc.*

Gustaf Sobin.

University of California Press, 2000.

247 pages. \$18.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffery Beam

For the past 35 years expatriate poet Gustaf Sobin has roamed southwestern France exploring a limitless engagement in the face of limited things, and aiming his pen at our contemporary inability to self-reflect. *Luminous Debris* focuses oftentimes on such minute fragments of our past as to prove true Blake's universe in a grain of sand: "No matter how ephemeral, vestige – one comes to learn – can teach us everything we need to know, and knowing, anticipate." The essays cover many earlier periods of Provençal history – from a skull with a prosthetic seashell ear, to ceramic pictographs, to votive mirrors, to lost cities. All fascinating under his poetic and piercing gaze.

He reflects again and again on how "we know, in fact, so very little . . . We're left with the illegible relic of some extinct civilization." He continues, "We go on asking, don't we? But aren't the questions alone so much richer than the mean trickle of 'verifiable fact' that the archaeologists have offered us? For the curtain that has fallen between the unknown and the known, between the magnitude of our questions, and the paucity of our answers, affects not only archaeology but every field of human endeavor." This Sobin sees as the crux of why we have "grown estranged from our origins" and desperate to acknowledge only those things that have been "processed, electronically channeled, compiled." It is the cherished mystery we have lost, "the dark floating universe from which humankind has always drawn solace and the impalpable reflection of its own deepest identity." Poet and novelist Sobin reads the landscape like a book, and our cultural debris as patterns of becoming.

The critique of contemporary society embedded in his observations sting with their grief for an original Eden in which humanity's integration into landscape was less destructive. He wonders at our adaptability and creativity, and at the technology we invent which separates us from the earth and from our real selves.

He traces the fluid movement of archaic creativity to aesthetic codification, defining change from community to civilization, from natural process to dominating nature.

Sobin's observations, and the language through which he makes them, emerge with an ease and gracefulness that bespeak great comfort in listening, recalling A.R. Ammons' definition of a poem as "a walk." Sobin traces each step in awe, satisfaction, and delight in discovery. *Luminous Debris* evokes Provençal landscape and its tutelary god, "the sun, that vast Mediterranean medallion." Poetic, yet deeply scientific; elegant, yet personal; revelatory, yet equally mysterious, Sobin's essays are literature and science of the highest order.

The Sun Takes Us Away: New and Selected Poems.

Benjamin Saltman.

Red Hen Press, 1996.

191 pages. \$12.95 (paperback.).

Sleep and Death the Dream.

Benjamin Saltman.

Red Hen Press, 1999.

57 pages. \$10.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by M.A. Roberts

Reading Benjamin Saltman's *The Sun Takes Us Away: New and Selected Poems* is like putting on your favorite winter coat; it's snug, even though it's old and ripped and drafts seep through, chilling you, making you feel alive. These poems do just that. They're warm but not comfortable enough to let you forget that reality is harsh.

There are a variety of themes running throughout this collection – poems about childhood, family, injustice, materialism – but the majority of the poems focus on the domestic life of a father, teacher, and practiced observer of the world. Saltman's eye is alert and his poems are made lucid by their vivid images and made meaningful by their keen insights into the commonness of the human experience. As I flip through the pages, I can stop on almost any page and find where I've