

## 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.

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*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

underlined a revealing, quotable line: "we live our past like a disease. / We move in an eternal stumble" ("Hippocrene"); "we lie in arbors of our making" ("Arbor"); "We have gone crazy with belief" ("Myself as a House"); "Light slices the sky, you are less and less / able to stifle a cry for someone to save you." ("Cascades: the Arrival").

One stylistic aspect that runs throughout Saltman's work is his use of personification. From his earliest to his latest work, inanimate objects defy stasis, take on human desires. "Myself as a House" is a good example, as we are given the surreal equation: the house and man are one. In Saltman's world, the house "breath[s] rich fumes," has a "wife and three children," and inspects itself for the "termites' cursives" who "build the house in reverse." Other personifications abound in this volume: "food will set out for mouths"; the "city slips onto sand"; "smoke questions"; the "sun" sews; "guilt crawls on all fours"; cut trees "finger" themselves; knives "dream"; maple trees "ring bells." Such striking images create a sense of one being dug-in, sealed into position – the middle-class life? I think so. In a late poem, "The Committee," Saltman writes "Flowers, crisp and / dead though the petals remained, / lined the driveway / and said that what was allotted / to middle-class life / would be revealed to me." Several stanzas later the secret unfolds as he ponders the items of his home: "It was clear that what I had had me." He is bound, dug-in, but not stifled. I imagine Saltman in a swivel chair constantly observing and writing about the middle-class world that is so blunt and apparent but ironically invisible to those who live it.

On the back cover of *The Sun Takes Us Away*, W.S. Merwin says that Saltman's poems possess a "lovely plainness." I cannot agree more with his estimation. Saltman's style is clean like Sunday-dinner glasses that have been carefully washed and dried. He's also direct, unhindered by any pretentiousness. The voice is humble; even when he criticizes American culture (as in "The Purchase," a poem that attacks the American drive to consume), I sense that he is chastising himself as much as he is the average citizen.

While *The Sun Takes Us Away* represents Saltman's work over the past 30 years, his newest publication, *Sleep and Death the Dream*, gives us the poet's final work, written while Saltman knew he was dying. This thin volume is powerful. Perhaps I am being propelled into emotion because I know that a real man lived, got a disease, wrote these poems and died. But I don't think that the story behind the book is all that is at work here. These poems are good because they move me and make my sympathies resonate.

In this work, the human is celebrated. Consider "All the Parts," where Saltman brings to the fore the mangled human yet calls it beautiful, calls it complete:

The man with a dent in his head,  
the woman with half a jaw,  
these are more complete than flowers  
with all their petals.

This fine book is full of these rare, surprising lines.

The poems in *The Sun Takes Us Away* and *Sleep and Death the Dream* are clear, bold, and humane. More importantly they express what it means to be human. And that's a grand accomplishment. Near the end of the book, Saltman writes "Every one who leaves intensifies what's here." Evidence to that truth is in Saltman's poems, which, I am certain, will deepen and intensify with every reading and the persistence of time.

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*Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan.*

Howard Sounes.

Grove Press, 2001.

527 pages. \$27.50 (hardback).

*Reviewed by Kevin McGowin*

May 24 of this year marks Bob Dylan's 60th birthday, and all of a sudden he's never been bigger or more important, at least since sometime in the 60s. A man who's been around for 40 years is current again, still touring and producing work that's among the best of his career, and seemingly in with a generation who, like Howard Sounes, is in its mid-thirties. It all began with 1997's Grammy-winning classic *Time Out of Mind*, his first album of new material in seven years, and continued through the release of Columbia's retrospective *The Essential Bob Dylan*, so far as I know the only CD (other than a Swedish import, which is actually a better collection) to include "Things Have Changed," the song that's really re-launched Dylan's career. In March alone, he won an Oscar for it (it had also won a Golden Globe) for Best Original Song in a Film (the excellent *Wonder Boys*) which landed *The Essential Bob Dylan* in the top 10, and saw Sounes' book hit the stores along with major articles in both *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone* (the "Dylanology" article).

I admit to buying at least one copy of everything I just mentioned, and then some, which along with this review and the fact that "Things Have Changed" was in large part the inspiration for my novel *The Benny Poda Years* (before he won anything for it and before I'd seen *Wonder Boys*), I guess I now qualify as a Dylanologist myself. That, and the fact that I'm "teaching" his work to 19-year-old college students. Contemporary American poetry sucks, with very few exceptions, but Dylan will be remembered as one of the greatest post-War American poets. As the *Rolling Stone* article asserts, it won't be long before colleges offer courses on him.