

CULTURE

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Harmonies of a “girlyman”

By Alan Lewis
Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

“We were always headed in this direction,” said Ty Greenstein of the harmony group Girlyman, speaking of herself and friend/bandmate Doris Muramatsu. “When we met Nate [Borofsky] in college, the three of us would sit around and play guitars and sing songs, and since there were three of us, we’d make up different parts to sing so we wouldn’t get bored. When we started Girlyman, we already knew what to do and how to do it, in terms of singing together.”

It shows. In the field of pop group vocals, Girlyman is in the rarest of company. It should be a luxurious sonic bubble bath for the ears when this threesome takes the Higher Ground stage on Wednesday.

“Doris and I were sort of harmony geeks from very early on,” recalled Greenstein. “I remember my dad gave me a tape of the Everly Brothers when I was about 13, and I was fascinated by the way the voices sang different parts but blended perfectly. I taught myself all the harmonies just because it was so fun to sing along.”

There is no finer place to start than the Everlys.

“From there I guess somehow we discovered Simon and Garfunkel, and that was like the next level, because they did things like counterpoint. Doris and I discovered that not only did we love figuring out all the parts, we were in luck because she was a soprano and I was an alto, and our voices blended eerily well.

“Later on, we discovered that some contemporary groups were doing even more sophisticated things with harmonies — notably the Indigo Girls and Jonathan Brooke’s old group, The Story. The Story in particular used lots of strange dissonance and even more complex, almost choral, counterpoints. I remember when Doris and I heard that for the first time our heads practically exploded.”

Former Story vocalist Jennifer Kimball, now of Maybe Baby and the Wayfaring Strangers, is easily among the finest harmony singers of recent times. One can place her name confidently alongside Phil Everly’s.

Perfecting group vocals normally in-



“We spend a lot of time writing our vocal parts for the songs, and they’re often very tight with lots of suspensions that have to be hit exactly to sound in tune.”

— Ty Greenstein

volves exhaustive rehearsing, though this is by no means the whole story.

“We spend a lot of time writing our vocal parts for the songs, and they’re often very tight with lots of suspensions that have to be hit exactly to sound in tune,” said Greenstein. “So the hardest thing in any situation, especially live, is hearing each other and tuning. Recently, we decided to start using in-ear monitors, which makes us look a little like Secret Service, but we can hear a lot better now.”

Joyful Sign, the latest Girlyman album, is scheduled for release on April 13. Advance copies are available exclusively at shows.

“*Joyful Sign* to me is our most exciting CD yet,” said Greenstein. “The title comes from the song by the same name, which contains the line,

*Sometimes leaving is a joyful sign
Like a little child singing*

*‘This little light of mine,
Gonna let it shine, let it shine.’*

So the song, and the album as a whole, is really about that theme — leaving. But really it’s about that thrilling moment when you decide to leave something known for something unknown. There’s joy in that, a sense of freedom.

“This has been a time of transitions for Girlyman — after living together in the same Brooklyn apartment for five years, we’re all moving out. A couple of us are leaving New York altogether. But there’s this sense of real possibility in making this change, and the chance to commit to the band even more when we’re not all living on top of each other.”

Where did this trio get its moniker you ask? “It’s a fun name, that’s all,” said Greenstein. “It has a playfulness about it that resonates with us. We said it and it clicked instantly.”

Greenstein tells of these three also clicking with their own Vermont jingle. “We have a song called ‘Moose in the Road’ that Nate spontaneously wrote after a gig in Vermont, when I was driving. There were all these moose-crossing signs, and I said ‘Wow, I’ve never seen a moose. I’d really like to see one ... but not in the road.’”

So, Borofsky took the mandolin out and started singing. And here are some of the lyrics that came out:

*There are lots of animals that our van
could handle*

Like a dog or a cat or a frog or a toad

Even a deer, we’d probably still live

*But I don’t wanna see no moose in
the road.*

“Of course, we all love animals, so it’s an appalling song, but it’s really funny and occasionally we even play it onstage,” said Greenstein.

Asked if there could be a perfect double-bill involving Girlyman, what would be the other act, Greenstein said, “We’ve already toured with our heroes, the Indigo Girls, which was transcendent. We’d love to open for the Dixie Chicks at some point, because they’re such amazing musicians and clearly such cool people with loads of integrity.”

So Girlyman is hitting the road in support of a new album. But with this crew, all roads lead back to that trademark rich, tight blending of voices.

“The harmonies are really unusual, and I think really deep because they come from this place of love that we all have for each other,” said Greenstein. “Also we’ve known each other so long that we have sort of a shared humor that we try to bring other people into at our shows. So a lot of people say that going to a Girlyman show is like hanging out with friends — if your friends also happen to play a lot of instruments.”

Girlyman’s moose-ready band van is bound for Higher Ground: the place to be for glorious harmony. 🚐

Who: Girlyman with Adrienne
Where: Higher Ground, South Burlington
When: Wednesday, 7:30 p.m.
For more information:
www.highergroundmusic.com, www.girlyman.com

The domestic side of same-sex marriage

By Terri Schlichenmeyer

Review: Homo Domesticus by David Valdes Greenwood (Dacapo Lifelong Press \$22, 214 pages)

When you see a couple walking hand-in-hand, it kind of makes you smile, doesn't it?

Ahhh, young love.

You know how it is: Two people meet and sparks fly. They date for a while, getting to know one another, deciding if they have a future together. They shyly introduce one another to family and friends. And eventually, they decide that they want to spend the rest of their lives together, a proposal is made, marriage is planned, and there you are. They become man and ...

Husband.

In the delightful new book *Homo Domesticus* by David Valdes Greenwood, you'll read about love gained, lost, gained

again, and the happiest-ever-after ever.

When David Valdes met Jason Greenwood, it could have been love at first sight complete with soundtrack, if not for the college setting. Valdes was smitten and flirted with Jason, but conversational lines were mixed up and neither thought the other liked him.

Still, they decided to go on a non-date, a "plan" rather than a romantic rendezvous because Jason was seeing someone else. One non-date turned into two, and soon they were spending a lot of time together. After months of non-dates and "plans," Valdes, ever the romantic, waited for Jason to declare his affections. When the avowal wasn't forthcoming, he gave Jason an ultimatum.

True love always triumphs, though. Jason admitted his affection for David, they moved into a drafty apartment together, and they decided to get married. Although wedded bliss in the strictest legal sense wasn't possible,

Valdes and Greenwood had a meaningful ceremony and considered themselves husband and husband.

Although it sounds like a cliché, Valdes Greenwood says that around their seventh anniversary, the couple began to have "problems." Everything one did seemed to irritate the other. Their apartment felt like it was shrinking as problems swelled. David moved out and "the VGs," as friends called them, were officially no longer a couple.


As any good romantic knows, though, love can make seemingly-impossible things work out fine. David and Jason reconciled. They decided to make their union legally official, since marriage had been recently allowed. And then they began to think of the next logical step: children.

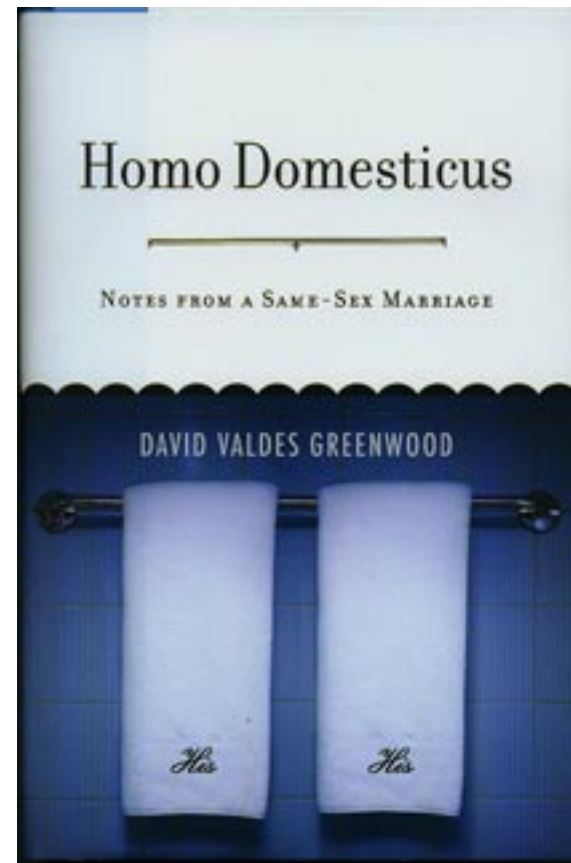
Can a man and his husband ever get the family they crave?

Do you swoon at flowers given or poetry recited? Do you cry at romantic movies? Then grab a tissue and get ready for a book

that will tickle your tender side and make you sigh with amour. Valdes Greenwood is chatty, a little gossipy, and not one bit afraid to dish relationship secrets; in fact, reading this book is just like having a latte with your best friend who just got married and can't wait to tell you everything. The fun part is, you can't

wait to hear it all. In short, Valdes Greenwood is a born storyteller, and this is one of the sweetest stories you'll ever read.

Take a walk down the w-aisled side and pick up a copy of *Homo Domesticus*. This happily-ever-after story makes a book you're going to love. 



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The word, the knife, the poem

By Beth Kanell

Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

Review: *The Messenger: New and Selected Poems 1976-2006* by Ellen Bryant Voigt

There are only 10 new poems in Ellen Bryant Voigt's just-released collection *The Messenger: New and Selected Poems 1976-2006*. I wish there were more, because for me, each time Voigt releases a new group of poems, I realize there's a new principle she's putting into effect. And 10 poems is a bit of a short run for me to grasp and grapple with in her latest.

In fact, I have to look words up (like *Rubato*, which is the title of her second new poem here: Italian in origin, a musical term for fluctuation of speed within a musical phrase — which alerts me to listen to the changes within the poem's meter more intensely and actively), recollect the classics and biology, reach for visions of birds whose forms and colors I may not yet be aware of.

The book's final poem is both fierce and frightening: The messenger is not a kind one, and the Annunciation (Mary hearing the angel announce her future), swept into the poem, contrasting its assumed comfort to the danger of the messenger Voigt has witnessed.

"One doesn't notice wings when they're at rest. / One doesn't notice the scythe of the beak at rest: // opaque, like horn, or bone, knobbed at the base / but tapering, proportional to the head."

Grasp at the heron mentioned soon, but there's little doubt that this is a more dangerous, more threatening messenger. It doesn't leave for the winter; it stays, "camouflaged / among the gaunt gray alders along the brook, / still as a stalk beside the water's edge — // of course it's there."

Like a student voluntarily accepting the leadership and carving knife of a skilled teacher, the reader of these poems — by choice — may bare the throat to this power. But despite my choice here of "starting at the end of the book," it makes sense instead to follow the path Voigt lays out in her sequence from earliest published poems to current ones.

In the poems from her 1976 collection *Claiming Kin*, Voigt



writes from a looser, more rural stance, framed in the Southern farmland of her youth. Yet, the first piece opens with the hands-on killing of a chicken, and two poems later, in "Dialogue: Poetics," I find the voice of the poet who demands that every word be selected for significance and resonance:

Admiring the web, do we forget the spider? The real poem is a knife-edge, quick and clean.

Here are the terse, enjambed lines that become Voigt's hallmark. Her second collection, *The Forces of Plenty*, exhumes and examines grief and loss that are never fully explained; whatever post-mortem the poet has conducted is distilled instead into something less skeletal (if equally bloody). We peer into a life, then see the curtain sharply drawn across the window. In "Year's End," there's a flash of family that quickly ascends into complication, multiple threats to children's lives:

We sat together in the little room, the walls blotched with steam, holding the baby as if the two of us could breathe for him and were not helpless.

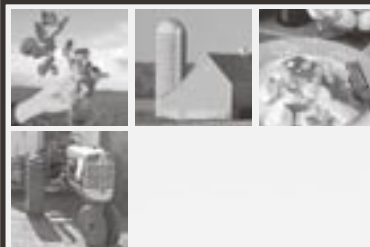
In "Jug Brook," the deaths of

wildlife (deer, fish, even mosquitoes) rise into a personal lament: "Have I learned nothing? God, / into whose deep pockets our cries are swept, / it is you I look for / in the slate face of the water."

So the selected poems move onward, as we and Voigt, with 30 years to collapse into a single book, struggle for vision and perspective. I find her choices from *The Lotus Flowers* reflective of the increasingly specific professorial position she undertakes, as she tells "The Last Class," "Put this in your notebooks: / All verse is occasional verse." And then she instructs, "The man is not a symbol," and pounds forth, "I wanted to salvage / something from my life, to fix / some truth beyond all change," as she pushes from the poem's premise like a climber's stretch toward the intended goal, the goal that was always the reason for the toehold chosen. Later she names a "cruel perfected music."

Two Trees offers variations, as if in music, upon both Eden and the intertwining of song and story. And then the work takes a powerful side journey, away from the terse and pruned earlier lines, into a longer, looser structure of a sequence of sonnets that evoke a community suffering the influenza epidemic of 1918, at the end

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American life in poetry

By Ted Kooser
U.S. Poet Laureate, 2004–2006



Ted Kooser

Those of us who have hunted morel mushrooms in the early spring have hunted indeed. The morel is among nature's most elusive species. Here Jane Whitledge of Minnesota captures the morel's mysterious ways.

Morel Mushrooms

Softly they come
thumbing up from
firm ground

protruding unharmed.
Easily crumbled
and yet

how they shouldered
the leaf and mold
aside, rising

unperturbed,
breathing obscurely,
still as stone.

By the slumping log,
by the dappled aspen,
they grow alone.

A dumb eloquence
seems their trade.
Like hooded monks

in a sacred wood
they say:
Tomorrow we are gone.

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of World War I. Voigt created the transition of form as a discipline for herself; the selection of 32 of the sonnets here conveys the passionate liturgy of the full book.

Voigt's 2002 collection, *Shadow of Heaven*, is so much less interlinked that it almost moves beyond the spider at the center of the web that she posited in 1976. Grappling with both the deaths and the lives of her parents, and the rhythms of her marriage to Francis Voigt, she announces in "Long Marriage":

*More than a lucky fit —
not planks planed from
the same
oak trunk but mortise and*

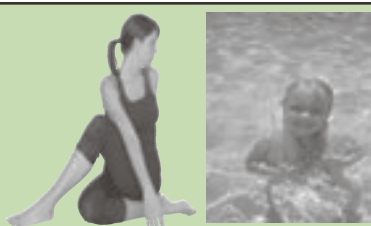
*tenon —
it is the yoke that makes
the pair; that binds them to
their blind resolve ...*

Through a conversation with the poet Aga Shahid Ali, a sequence of sonnets redolent of Virginia (her sister's home; Voigt has chosen Vermont for her own since 1969), and a long intense series ("The Art of Distance") that narrates stories of her father and grandparents, Voigt names the ways in which she has chosen to resemble her parents, even as she continues to argue with their voices. Her meter insists on the import of each word: "My strict father," she pounds, "would have

been appalled" at the way she watches an injured snake struggle toward its own death. She yields to the judgment of the voice, then piles story upon story until finally, like Penelope in Odysseus' absence, asserting the feminine: "but like loom's ratcheting shuttle, weaving / first a net, then a veil, and then shroud."

And that, of course, brings us to the finale of *The Messenger* — circle back to the start.

Beth Kanell is co-owner of Kingdom Books, a poetry and mystery specialty shop in the Northeast Kingdom. Check them out at www.KingdomBks.com.



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