

Words for all seasons

By STEPHEN MANSFIELD

THE UNDYING DAY: Poems by Hans Brinckmann. Trafford Publishing, 2011, 131pp., \$14.50 (paperback)

In person, Hans Brinckmann is a dapper European gent with the patrician manner of the well-practised host or master of ceremonies. Reading this book of time-seasoned verse, one suspects that he would be equally at ease dressed in an Oriental quilt, a winter robe in the manner of that most sage of Qing scholars, Chen Fuyao.

A habitue of many world cities, Brinckmann's poetry has been fixed and fastened in the stream of time and material reality, the two great themes of verse. In terms of the potential for literary yield, there is something to be said for living a long life. And some poets, like the St. Lucia native, Derek Walcott, now in his eighties, just seem to get better and better. Brinckmann, who returned to Tokyo some years ago, a city he first knew in 1950, has been a poet, a human work in progress, for a very long time.

We all know verse to be the most demanding literary form of them all, a gruesome tussle with language, the chances of producing truly distinctive work, slim at best. Our appreciation of poetry, on the other hand, comes rather more naturally. Arguably, verse is innate, the music of our ancestors, a stream we do not return, but revert to.

Brinckmann's works are not exactly nature poems, unless human nature can be so regarded. Each work ends with a date and the name of a city. The author's career in international banking, combined with wanderlust and intellectual inquiry, find his poems set in the cosmopolitan worlds of Venice, Sydney, Kyoto, Beverly Hills, or at the tables of the Bistro Josephine in the rue du Cherche-Midi.

Brinckmann has written elsewhere that the purpose of poetry is not to explain life, but to express it. Consonant with this idea, his poems do not seek to provide answers, but to stimulate inquiry and recognition by means of striking imagery.

One poem begins:

"If you can fly with the wind and
Forgive an erring friend ..."

Another:

"Widows descending heavily
Like painted lead balloons."

"Holy Green" is a gentle protest against the over-fervent co-opting of the color:

"Its priests, proliferating
Like apostles after Golgotha."

There are poems of loss and longing, where writing cannot eliminate the pain but may turn an open wound into bearable scar tissue. There is bereavement superseded by sorrow at the inadequacy of a final resting place for a loved one:

"The tomb is but a house of stone
A focus yes — but you're not there."

And there are the clever observances and synchronicities, patterns privy to a poet, from a discussion of mushrooms with an eminent female Dutch writer in one instance, to an Osaka bar, where a young woman opens her white hands:

"And blushing shyly revealed their secret:
Palms blackened by the mushroom of Hiroshima."

There are re-workings of myth, in which the proto-mother is not a banished sinner, but pulsing with life and the promise of reprised sexuality, not offering the fatal apple to Adam:

"But to a passing horseman whose hunger
Matched Eve's yearning to ride his horse."

The collection ends with "The Ballad of Hope Hill," a longer work rendered in a style vaguely contemporaneous with Mathew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough, but otherwise timeless, tidal, cyclical in its optimism. This Orphic poem, unfolding the concealed patterns of human nature and history, is the book's coda.

Consistently, Brinckmann casts himself as mediator, a conducting material recharged by the stream of time. Where some poets, even great ones, resist the vision of anything finer than a futile individual existence, Brinckmann celebrates life's brimming energies, even as they discharge into more temperate currents with the advance of age.

Just as the Chinese scholars believed that winter was a time for quiet pleasures, contemplation and study, the mature years in the existence of a poet are the most introspective season of all.