

The Seasons of Jim Johnson's *The First Day of Spring in Northern Minnesota*
By Beth L. Virtanen, Ph.D.

This morning, as I watched light snow fall in northern Michigan, I savored the latest work of Jim Johnson, *The First Day of Spring in Northern Minnesota: Poems*. It's a beautiful work, one that fits perfectly on a spring day, like today, as a light snow falls and everyone I know is complaining about the "white stuff" that just won't quit. As that wet spring snow accumulated in my yard, I was transported to a place where the significant issues of the natural and human world are explored through Johnson's accurate and inquisitive gaze and captured in fine and exacting language.

The book has three sections, the first and second substantial and the third a single poem set by itself. In the first section, which lends the book its name, spring comes, much as it does here, with great indecision, one day beautifully warm, another beautifully cold. In "The Return of the Shaman, Later the Weather Report," is reflected the view here: "April is the ice that leaves the edge of the lake, / then comes back again, / leaving and coming, leaving and coming / in the wind, / and back out again. . . (p. 17). The language captures the coming and going of the seasons, the fitful arrival of spring. The movement of the poem takes us through the history of the Minnesota Iron Range, but it is set in a context of more constant significances: ". . . And then / there is this ghost dancing / on our democracy and dreams. Now in April / the ice so uncertain, unless you were a god with a long pole / you wouldn't want to walk on it (p. 17). Here, there is contemplation of both larger and very minute aspects of a teeming world that is simultaneously historic, mythic and immediate.

The second section "A Good Sauna Always Burns Down," focuses on human interaction with their world. An old man and a young man's interactions serve as a touchstone in its larger movement which explores with exactitude. Urgency as a natural condition, for example, is explored. Here is "Deer Flies, Midsummer":

While he contends with nectar, the old man said,
and pollen
of flowers, her mouth parts cut the skin,
lap the deer,
human, even shaman blood oozing
from wounds
on hot July days. I was once a young man too and
sprouted wings,
large eyes and buzzed her hair wanting to flower
forever inside her
bloodstream. (p. 51)

This voice, this acuity, I find typical of Johnson. His is a voice that converses on the magnitude of what it is to be human through the observation of an old man's thoughts on the minute details of the deer fly. Young men, urgent as deer flies in July, seek what fulfills. Old men remember.

The closing section, made up of a single poem, ties together the universe of things addressed within the work--our place, our history, our world, the here-and-now and the hereafter. It is a fitting end to this fine work.

As I sit here, awaiting the arrival of spring, Johnson's words, like the stories he mentions in his closing, create in me a moment of repose and reflection: This world, with its own cycles and epochs, is that of which we all are part. Even with the movement of history, which changes the superficial aspects of living, in Johnson's world, we are forever tied to the earth.

Jim Johnson's (2012) *The First Day of Spring in Northern Minnesota: Poems* is published by Red Dragonfly Press of Northfield, Minnesota. It can be found here: www.reddragonflypress.org