Foreword

The opening lines of *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* give us an idea of what to expect from this vivid collection. Authority, daring, a language of color and sure movement, first of all, and a high style of great speed and resource that can range, without apparent change of step, from irony and farce to clear lyrical elegy, from refracted projections of child-talk to direct or costumed maturity.

The individual poems, arranged in three sections, comprise one sequence, with a setting as present and consistent as the sets of a theatrical production, and they bring on a cast of characters who recur in a spectrum of forms and phantoms, luminous shapes altering in the same kaleidoscope. The second poem, in fact, is a "Dramatis Personae" list (which may or may not have been intended to recall the section with the same title at the beginning of James Merrill's "The Book of Ephriam"—Mr. Manning does not make a show of his reading, which must be considerable, and his allusions are cloaked and sometimes mischievous). The catalogue tells us a few crucial things about the personages we are about to meet: oracular details, clues as to how to regard the ballooning figures rather than plain temporal information. For instance, by way of an entire introduction, "*Sissy* is the younger sister hanging by a thread."

It is obvious that this book is original both in the more important primal sense which indicates the source from which it rises, and in the other sense which has become common tender: it is not commonplace, familiar, or of an expected kind. In fact it is wild and strange, and from conception to form, imagery, and vocabulary its author takes enormous risks. Part of the pleasure

and excitement of reading it comes from seeing how the poems and the sequence as a whole, step by step, survive, one surprise following another and the parts coming to reflect one another and compose a visionary completeness that is assured, occasionally moving, and soon recognizable without being altogether explicable.

It is, as the title tells us, a book of visions, and the kinds of visions alter as the kaleidoscope turns. They are made up of make-believe, hallucination, memory, fragments of reflected history and legend and fantasized hearsay, dramatized dream, images of wishes and of dread. Most of them rise as fictions of the fictitious Lawrence Booth, known as Law, at different ages of his childhood, adolescence, and young manhood. Some are projections expressed in the caricatured and parodied “End-man Minstrel” language of Law’s “pastoral comrade,” Black Damon, whose pieces, which have their own recognizable tone and sorrowful dimension, are entitled “Dreadful Chapter One” through “Dreadful Chapter Seven.” The visions are not only formalized fantasies, they are consciously theatrical, with Law himself at least partly directing the show, and the theatrical nature of the display allows the shapes and figures their cut-out relief, their layered apparitions and ironies. The visionary cast of the whole work holds one part after another up to the light and shows the planes of time back-lit, one behind another.

A number of interlude pieces occur through the series and step out of the proscenium but not out of the performance. The first, with the theme of loneliness, is “Envoy,” a column of want ads, men looking for women. They run from

Man who believes television
is the mouthpiece of the devil,
seeks female with similar views.

to

Eccentric (?) gentleman (negotiable)-
tinker/farmer searching the heavens
for the true spark of love (breast-size unimportant). Please.

“Proof,” another of the interludes, is in the form of a page of a geometry book, with a psychic diagram, columns of *statements* and *reasons* to prove that “The sphere of love exists tangent to the sphere of sin.”

A third, “A Condensed History of Beauty,” consists of a small chronology, concise but fragmentary glimpses over a period of seventy years, that race past like pages of a rapidly flipped picture book.

The most theatrical of these pieces is a mock Circuit Court document setting forth a Complaint by a local chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy against Lawrence Booth (age not specified) for entering “the Plaintiff organization’s place of meeting,” cutting the buttons off the portrait of a Confederate cavalry officer, jumping onto a table and shouting “How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!”

Besides providing an array of comic perspectives, the out-of-the-frame sections are striking displays of Mr. Manning’s appetite for formal variety, one aspect of his rich gift for invention, which charges the current and prosody of his lines, and leaves no two poems quite alike. The personae themselves become multiple characters, or multiple facets of the same characters, or multiple facets of each posing as the whole. They become tantalizing, elusive, images from vaudeville or from fun-house mirrors, while remaining inhabitants of one personal pantheon.

The Missionary Woman, for example, of whom we are warned, in the “Dramatis Personae” that she is

... endowed
with certain properties such as transformation

and are left wondering, near the end, about,

The chance that the Missionary Woman
is an exquisite work of Booth's imagination.

She arrives on the scene in a brooding soliloquy about guilt and punishment, entitled "Prisoner of Conscience," in which several layers of age and memory seem to be laminated:

They kicked him out
for a long list of terrible reasons:

.....

... they confined him to the thirty-seven acres
and told him his punishment was work
of the lifelong, back-breaking variety;
and The Church of the Socially Concerned and Aware
sent out the Missionary Woman to comfort him with prayer.

.....

And the Missionary Woman, as it turns out,
has the finest legs in all of Christendom—

.....

How strange, his crimes should finally bring him ease;
his hearth is bright and the praying does not cease.

She becomes, in fantasy or metaphor, a landscape of her own, the river valley running down her sleeping back one of the book's happy explorations.

Two unfailing good spirits accompany Law through all these roles and transformations. One is Red Dog, "the sure-fire antidote to the devil," Law's animal shadow-spirit, another shape-shifter, unquestioning, unpretending, a reliably benign aspect of the world, who sits outside the church and howls during the lack-luster hymns. The other is Law's closest friend, Black Damon,

... a baby-faced black boy
with big arms ...

and his own family, troubles, and transfigurations. The grotesque parody of Amos-and-Andy lingo in which Black Damon's "Dreadful Chapters" are couched is startling, offensive, relentless, and the fact that it seems to demand an explanation is, I expect, part of its role in insisting upon the preposterous nature of the radical situation and mores that it caricatures. One cannot help hearing it as an echo of the disturbing ghost of Berryman's Mr. Bones, and a suggestion of the dream-foil way Bones lingers around the warm, affecting, eloquent figure of Damon.

Violence occurs, or threatens to occur, in many of the poems, and the father-figures, especially Law's father, are the source of most of it. Law's father, Mad Daddy "with the shotgun full of history," appears in different pieces as Ole Dreadful Daddy, Ole Black Jack Daddy, Crackshot Daddy, Ninety-Proof Daddy, Heartbreak Daddy, Stumble Down Daddy, Knocked Out Daddy, Bad Gamble Daddy, Stagger Lee Daddy, Real Mad Daddy who shot Red Dog in the hip with buckshot "fer suckin egg an makin ole hen fussy," and Law shouts into a log "*I hate you, Mad Daddy.*" In a climactic piece, the next to the last, "A Dream of Ash and Soot," Mad Daddy rides up drenched in kerosene, stands up on his horse and shouts, among other things

... *I love you like*
a furnace, son! Heigh-Ho Silver, away!
... strikes a match on the heel of his boot and turns himself
into a galloping yellow torch ...
... and the sun falls down.

And a current of tenderness also runs through the visions, floating the Missionary Woman, Red Dog, Black Damon, and appearing in the landscape of the thirty-seven acres and in the orchard in "Shady Grove"

Booth lazes in the spidery orchard watching
a ladybug navigate the back of his hand
as if the sun-freckled territory seemed familiar—
how she is like a red grain of creeping joy,
and these apple trees like lichen-clad promontories
poking into the middle air, and the shaggy moss
beneath his hand, a shimmering green plain.
Such days come to him like a quivering dove
and he needs no earthly reward for his pains
but this, when his heart becomes a book
of hours and the day becomes its own vessel,
unmoored.

That is, I think, a key passage of an outrageous, lit-up, wide-ranging sequence of poems which in the end prove, indeed, to be facets of one view. The writing's unfaltering audacity is equaled by its artistic control, and the result is an astonishing collection, still more astonishing as a first book; the achievement of a fresh and brilliant talent.

W. S. Merwin