When the big hand on the starfish
and the little hand is on the sea snail,
it’s nine o’clock
and I’m nine or is it seven....

Vancouver-born Russell Thornton
lived in Greece and Wales before he
returned to North Vancouver a dozen
or so years ago. It’s a city of extremes,
where mountains rise from the sea,
with complex histories and
sociologies. Thornton is someone
who lives not in a place, but through
it and his work reflects this.

His first collection, *The Fifth Window*
(2000), demonstrated impressive
sensitivity, intensity, and honesty.
Since then, he has published four
more books, won numerous awards
and is widely-anthologized. Scant
wonder I thought, reading his most
recent, *Birds, Metal, Stone & Rain*.

Thornton is never trite. His poems
are often equal parts music,
observation and compassion. His new
collection is an understated yet
powerful evocation of Vancouver and
its people. While the indomitable
forces of nature are omnipresent,
there is much joy here, reflection too,
and memory, and sometimes
melancholy, but never regret. This is
one wise poet.

There’s also musicality of language
and muscularity of image. In
interviews, Thornton acknowledges
Irving Layton and one of his
epigraphs references Robinson Jeffers. Is he a lyrical imagist or tactile metaphysicist? I’ll leave that to readers.

Thornton’s poems seldom veer far from the ocean, as in “Ambleside Beach”, and the cycle of tides and of life. He is the beachcomber in “The Aeschylus Rock” who comes upon “Fresh corpse of a baby gull....” and thinks, “The tide will find it in an hour/and take what is left of it...The thief of fire/deep within the rock drinks/and eats it and lives forever.” Concluding a book that has poems about his daughter and his family, this is a reminder to cherish, as this poet clearly does, all of life.
The lines quoted at the top are a refrain from “When the Big Hand is on the Starfish” a meditation on the magnificent Vancouver Art Deco landmark the Marine Building and its magical clock. Vancouver’s colourful histories intersect as Thornton’s considerable gift takes us with ease from a child’s whimsicality to an adult’s recollection of the city’s history.

There’s nary an off-note in this book by a poet many have come to trust and love. I hope Harbour Publishing will consider a selected. The man has earned it.

Bruce Hunter
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