

THIS SIDE OF THE RIVER

An Annual Review of Books from WEST BRANCH Contributors

NO FAST FOOD HERE:

IN PRAISE OF SERIOUS POETRY

by Ellen Wehle

The Least of These, by Todd Davis. Michigan State University Press, 121 pp., \$19.95.

Cloud of Ink, by L.S. Klatt. University of Iowa Press, 64 pp., \$17.

Night Sweat, by Nathan Leslie. Hamilton Stone Editions, 111 pp., \$12.95.

Le Spleen de Poughkeepsie, by Joshua Harmon. University of Akron Press, 91 pp., \$14.95.

When I was poetry editor for a literary journal, I once opened a submission from a gentleman who mentioned we'd rejected him several times before. His cover letter was delightful, an old-fashioned, beautifully written epistle which included an anecdote, as I recall, about his flower garden. Half won over already, I took out his poems. My heart sank as I read. The poems were competent and accessible and, well, dull. Much as I wanted to be the editor who told this charming man "yes," his work was just too unambitious to be interesting.

Many years and writers later, one of my key tests for poetry still has to do with its degree of difficulty. If I can read a collection in one sitting, that means trouble—because it seems to me that poetry should have less in common with fiction, where turning pages quickly can be considered a compliment, than with an art exhibit. When I visit a museum I expect to linger a while with each painting, and when I read a book of poetry I expect to do so slowly and in stages. Most times, if meaning can be grasped at a single glance then not much meaning was there.

Fast food, sound bites, drive-through churches: In a society that's all about ease of consumption, poetry—good poetry—demands that we work a little for our pleasure. The following four books are not quick reads. They are not necessarily accessible. They are instead complex and exciting, a reminder to readers that making the effort is worth it.

I

Todd Davis is a writer at home in Nature, and his work pays close attention to the rhythms of the natural world. In *The Least of These*, man is not master of all he surveys but a creature like any other, smaller and less important than the land he inhabits. This quiet reverence permeates the book. Formally the poems vary in length and use a number of different verse styles. Davis has a special gift for compression, however, and his shortest pieces are often the most powerful. For example, “My Family Sees My Empty Hands” creates a visceral coldness with just eight lines:

I've nothing to show for my walk
 except the moon's wreckage, what's left
 of its light catching the snow's slow smoke,
 heat from a thaw rubbing against the cold body
 of winter, while I stomp my feet at the door,
 run my hands together, moonlight like frost
 on a corpse, so hard to recover any warmth,
 despite the fire that burns in the hearth.

In this winter nightscape Nature rules, man is alone, and even the moonlight is foreboding as it glows not like milk or silver coins, but “like frost on a corpse.” The pace is measured and grave; try reading “My Family” out loud and you’ll hear the long O’s of “snow’s slow smoke” bring the line nearly to a stop. The speaker spends seven lines describing an existential chill that leaves him “nothing to show” but “wreckage,” then ends with the obvious contrast, a fire burning. Less obvious is that final turn, where the speaker finds in the fire no relief—confirming our sense that his chill is not wholly physical. Rather than escaping winter, he has brought it indoors with him.

A theme of transcendence recurs throughout the book. Many poems are overtly religious and use wildlife or plant life to explore Christian concepts. Does the technique work? Yes and no. Poems such as “The

Face of Jesus,” “Doctrine,” and “The Blessing of the Body, Which Is the House of Prayer” succeed because they surprise, and because they leave breathing room for the reader. Here is “Doctrine” in its entirety:

I love the church
of the osprey, simple
adoration, no haggling
over the body, the blood,
whether water sprinkled
from talons or immersed
in the river saves us,
whether ascension
is metaphor or literal,
because, of course,
it’s both: wings crooked,
all the angels crying out,
rising up from nests
made of sticks
and sunlight.

In a way, the entire poem is contained in that first line-break—“church / of the osprey”—which forces readers to re-evaluate faith in terms of pure feeling. Unlike man, who quibbles over esoteric points of doctrine, the osprey worships by instinct, all hunger and “simple adoration.” The metaphor is a good fit because the points of comparison feel natural, as in the lines that compare a bird’s talons to a priest’s hand sprinkling water. The statement that there’s “no haggling / over the body” is all the more effective for being, in a literal sense, untrue. My friend once watched two hawks in flight battle over a mouse, seeming, through his binoculars, to pass it back and forth between them; with “no haggling” I thus had a weird visual of ospreys tussling over Christ’s body. I’ll admit that the word “angels” can ruin a poem for me, and I winced a little when I read it here. But with his next line Davis de-sentimentalizes the angel trope, the hallelujah chorus transformed by the birds’ nests into a raucous cawing. These are the sorts of deft, unexpected turns that keep a poem energized.

Other pieces are less successful. In “A Psalm for My Children” we are told:

The spirit of the Lord grows round
in the bellies of watermelon, ripe and full of sugar-water.
The taste of the Lord is shiny and sweet....

At the risk of sounding too much the academic, I should say that sentiments like this one won't play well with most audiences. Be they believers, nonbelievers, Christians, or something else, readers want a poet to lead them forward with a light touch. Earnestness is problematic not because today's readers are too cynical (an accusation I often hear), but because it is heavy-handed. In "Psalm," a tone that begins as earnest all too quickly crosses the line to cloying. The tone of another piece, "Like a Thief," is heavy-handed in a different way, hectoring us that "Infidels always look like someone else, a new / neighbor, the latest immigrant who calls God by another // name" and warning against the propaganda that "keep[s] fear goose-stepping // toward anyone who doesn't agree." The last reference in particular feels like overkill. I'd argue that terrorists, televangelists, and dying firemen are more than enough to convey the poem's lesson of religious tolerance, without resorting to Nazis. Then again, perhaps *lesson* is the problem: in both "Psalm" and "Like a Thief" the writer-reader dynamic has shifted so that we are no longer led to meaning, but force-fed it.

Elsewhere, where Davis dials it down and lets the metaphors speak for themselves, the results are breath-catching. Stand-outs such as "Memory of Heaven," "After It Rained All Night, She Said He Woke Up Dead," and "Accident" linger in the mind long after the book is shut.

II

"Whereupon you are alone / in a cockpit" begins L. S. Klatt's collection, *Cloud of Ink*. With such an opening, who could fail to read on? Winner of the Iowa Prize, *Cloud of Ink* invites us through the looking-glass to a numinous inner landscape. Grasshoppers morph to Confederate swordsmen in "A Sudden Unspeakable Indignation," while in "Andrew Wyeth, Painter, Dies at 91," the familiar hayfields of Wyeth's paintings are invaded by a giant squid that rises up and wraps a barn in its tentacles. No explanation given. In this universe weirdness simply happens, bringing with it a startling emotional resonance.

“Transit of the Beautiful” is a good illustration of Klatt’s technique, combining vivid imagery with the sort of metaphysical questions some poets might find difficult to address in seven stanzas. “Transit” expands with each repeated reading, able to say much because it makes explicit very little:

Cockroach on the lip
 of a teacup
 while the woman upstairs
 puts a bag over her head
 & gasses the house.
 In conclusion, the lights go out; the soul is denuded.
 The insect makes no attempt to be heard
 no scream
 but, antennae waving like palm fronds before the Prince
 of Peace, crawls into the cup.
 To be destroyed, to be indestructible,
 this is always the question.

Each break has impact, in particular the break after the second stanza. The words float in white space and we anticipate the woman’s scream on seeing the roach until we realize, a beat later, that she has bigger worries. In “puts a bag over her head / & gasses the house” there’s a disconnect between tone and content that heightens the pathos. A similar disconnect emerges in the fourth stanza, where the matter-of-fact phrase “In conclusion” leads us to “the lights go out; the soul is denuded.” No one cares that this woman is killing herself, no one’s aware of it except the insect downstairs, who wants to live. When the gas spreads and the cockroach “makes no attempt to be heard” we suspect the statement applies to them both, that as she dies the woman, too, swallows her scream. At the end, to compare the to and fro motion of a roach’s antennae with the palm fronds waving before Christ: how bizarre, and yet how right.

Klatt performs a similar magic again and again; the images that are most out-of-left-field are also, somehow, inevitable. We are jolted, then struck by a sense of *Yes, of course*. For example, in “Affliction” the speaker tells us his house is underwater, an aquarium “grotesquely / immersed,” implying that he feels under observation like a goldfish. At once outside “painting this house with water,” and inside the house drowning, the

speaker seems in the grip of some fugue-like depression. “Affliction” concludes,

Come to the window, moon
jellyfish. Parachute
of tentacles to outer space.

Hardly a happy ending since it means his house has sunk to the bottom of the sea. But with this image the ocean depths transform to outer space and the poem’s ominous sense of crushing weight is lifted. In another example, “Broadcaster,” the speaker is a honeybee who says “Let’s admit that the buzz is sweeter / out of your mouth than mine,” continuing later with,

And let’s also suppose that your melody is sticky
or stuck
& that honeycombs have collapsed in my rotunda

Again, although it defies logic the visual image is pleasing, perhaps because of the architectural echo between “rotunda” and “honeycomb,” each individual cell of a honeycomb resembling a small round room.

This is not to say *Cloud of Ink* always works. However far-flung the congruence may be, in order to succeed poetry must be congruent at some level. Several of the pieces have a scattershot quality that doesn’t deliver. Reading “Cortona” or “The Americans,” my imagination strains; I struggle to follow the writer in his leaps and don’t quite make it. Lines like “To wander into oasis / & recognize as yet, as good as” thwart my every attempt at comprehension. Such failures may be a natural outcome, though, of taking risks. That Klatt asks me to leap is precisely why I enjoy his work, and in most cases the payoff is worth the effort.

In fact, one of my favorite poems, “May Day,” makes such wide leaps I didn’t realize it *was* a favorite until I realized I was reading it a fourth time:

I am adrift in a burned-out canoe
without a helmsman. It was once a birch
straight & narrow made swift. The planets
revolve behind the blue sky, but I don’t
witness. The news is good. The willow

has waded into the pond, & the purpose
of the pond is outside of me. The bow
of the boat follows the breezes. Light-
years from Zero.

In my college years I revered the music of Brian Eno. His non-melodic compositions created atmospheres in which my mind could drift free of linear thought, and he was a master of silence, the space that hung between his notes often as haunting as the notes themselves. “May Day” has a similar feel. Canoe, willow, pond: though we’re given the outline of a narrative, the poem is composed more of space than notes, more mood than story. Drifting in a boat is a perfect metaphor for letting go, while “without a helmsman” makes it clear the speaker has ceded control. What he knows is a single fact, his canoe. What he doesn’t know looms infinitely larger: “behind the blue sky” the planets wheel unseen in their orbits; this simple pond has a purpose beyond human understanding. Regardless how long he drifts with the breeze, he can never reach life’s source. (That final line “Light- / years from Zero” is so Eno-esque I can almost hear one of the ambient albums playing in the background.) Finally, there’s the title. On the one hand, it is idyllic, placing us in springtime when the foliage is lush and green, the air sweet. On the other hand, “May Day” is a nautical distress signal and the speaker has lost any means of controlling his course. That he’s bobbing along on a pond and not an ocean makes his SOS all the more poignant. “I am adrift,” he tells us. *Help*.

Granted, Klatt leaves a lot of “space between notes” for the reader to fill. Too much space for some, no doubt. But if the goal is to so engage an audience in such a way that they become instrumental to meaning, Klatt succeeds with *Cloud of Ink*.

III

Playfulness and love of language also distinguish Nathan Leslie’s *Night Sweat*. The most narrative of the group, *Night Sweat* makes good use of memory, mining it for the gritty and real rather than the sentimental.

One quartet of poems titled “Five,” “Nine,” “Thirteen,” and “Seventeen” shows the speaker at successive ages doing what boys like to do: throw rocks at cars, scavenge for rubbish. Repeating consonants, slant rhyme, and rhythm give the set a strong aural quality. Lines such as “carving creek bed rubble into badges / among the discarded

refrigerator, hub caps, / rusted beer cans, bottles of Beefeater” (from “Nine”) or “jump shot, high five, aluminum / siding, slap of leather and slide” (“Thirteen”) beg to be read aloud, the short, choppy beats suggesting a child’s manic energy. Equally skillful, the voice shifts as the set moves forward in time, the consciousness of each poem age-appropriate. The speaker of “Five,” for example, describes his life with monk-like simplicity: “A clank from the kitchen // rouses me. Filled with clouds. / I find a penny on the table. . . .” For a five-year-old waking from a nap, the sentence fragment “Filled with clouds” fits just right.

“Brothers” is another piece meant to be read aloud:

shrimp nets dredging the creek
 with both hands, minnows and shrimp
 commas among the shell shards
 and silt. He held the pilings,
 barnacles scraping knuckles,
 red clay squish, queasy
 at the thought of all beneath.

The repeating “s” and “k” sounds of “barnacles scraping knuckles” give the words a visceral roughness that matches their meaning, while the slant rhyme of “queasy” and “beneath” brings added finality to the end-stopped line. Wisely the speaker never names his brother, merely reporting their pastimes without comment, and we are left to intuit what the long-ago summers meant to him. If a golden haze of nostalgia seems to hang over the lines, it is of the reader’s own creation, and therefore satisfies. Nostalgia is always predicated on loss, and “Brothers” delivers its closing revelation with restraint, telling us only that “By November he was a glint, / an outline, a shimmer in mud.” However the brother was lost (went off to college? died?) I was glad that his fate is not made explicit.

Night Sweat includes several ekphrastic poems, and Leslie is able to channel the spirit of the various artists to a remarkable degree. In “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” he uses compression and jagged linebreaks to capture Fan Kuan’s 11th-century mountainscape, while the poem “Rain, Steam and Speed” mimics the rushing blur of Turner’s work. In a third piece, “Kandinsky at His Easel,” Leslie speaks in the artist’s voice and his pronouncements apply as much to poetry as to painting. When Kandinsky tells us “I am replicating Genesis, /

only not yet” we sense the anxiety underlying his boast. For any artist the challenge is to spin something out of nothingness, god-like; each syllable or brushstroke on the empty page or canvas might as well be a cry across the Void. A few stanzas later the poem continues:

I listen,
wait.
I am an upside down
beetle grasping for a grass blade.
This tree trunk makes the
branch possible as I’m
waiting for the canvas
to grow the branch.

What a wonderful conceit. I like picturing Kandinsky as a beetle, hanging by his heels as he waits for his painting to reveal itself, for the blank canvas in front of him to “grow the branch.” The implication that the work springs from a place beyond his control is yet another truth artists of all genres will recognize.

In contrast, a sequence of ten persona poems falls flat. “Kandinsky” succeeds not just because we know the speaker but because what he says rises above his limited experience to encompass our own. The poems “Ada,” “James,” and “Kristine” exclude the reader by paying homage to people we will never meet, and doing so in too-specific terms. We have no way “in.” Individual experience does not become universal; it’s as if we’re at a cocktail party, listening to strangers swap stories of escapades we didn’t share. Elsewhere, the poems disappoint when Leslie writes toward a predictable end, as with “In the Shade”:

I wanted to write a poem
about the nature of time,
of grace, or the essence
of fury in a lost world,

Despite my best intentions, I read this stanza and feel my attention switch off. The writer is pointing us toward a destination he already knows. Having named these lofty ideas he will now, as a matter of course, have an epiphany about the importance of the everyday, in this case “the snow peas / we planted and the oily feathers / of the grackles.”

Because the writer plays it safe and is never taken by surprise in his poem, neither is the reader.

Leslie succeeds most when he allows his jazzy language to carry him away. Lines such as “flashlight through the drainage tunnel as / far as you can go, cursive, kiss and milk” carry us along with him.

IV

My first apartment was at Twenty-third and Walnut streets in Philadelphia. This was in the eighties, when the downtown was undergoing a renaissance. Hulking over my building was an abandoned brick warehouse decked in generations of graffiti and a brand-new, jaunty banner: *Coming Soon, Luxury Lofts*. Flowerboxes appeared along the street, trash pick-up became more regular. Hopeful signs, but at night our alley still rang with the drunken arguments of men who drank no-name vodka; mornings when I left for work, I stepped over their empties. Despite all the optimism in the world, once a city sickens it is very, very hard to reverse the decline.

Joshua Harmon, in *Le Spleen de Poughkeepsie*, understands this fact. Though I’m tempted to call it an elegy, *Spleen* is really more a love song, immersing me in the sights and sounds and sadnesses of a place I’ve never known but feel as if I do. Given book-long treatment, any topic can grow old, and at first I worried that might happen here. But while the book does feel very cohesive, it isn’t repetitive. As he moves from page to page, Harmon just keeps turning his theme like a prism, finding ever subtler variations.

Part of this cohesiveness is due to a lack of titles. Most poems are untitled and as a result tend to run together in a continuous stream. As one might expect in a book about blight and loss, Time is a palpable presence:

on the outskirts of the absurd
 attention to the material life,
 of course the factories are empty
 and the train line overgrown,
 and the everyday fills the ravine
 beside the highway: the passive voice
 speaks on our winds and in the humming
 of our truck tires....

What strikes me most in these lines is the slowly filling ravine, which works on two levels. Literally the ravine is accumulating trash, the Coke cans and taco wrappers that blow along a highway. Figuratively, it's accumulating years. I also like the way "of course" introduces the list. *Of course all the jobs have left town, of course the trains no longer run since no one has a reason, anymore, to come here....* "Of course" contains a ton of heartbreak, reminding us it wasn't always like this, that Poughkeepsie was once vibrant. We see Time at work again in the next poem, which I'll quote in its entirety:

Thin ribbons of cloud and half a ruinous moon
in an afternoon sky: meager sun gilds asphalt

briefly and slides out of sight as the furnace
kicks on again: in the tumult of equivalences

between split log and smoke, margin and note,
my knowledge unbraids itself from freed

finitudes: and whatever sense of the possible
the afternoon offers vanishes in a lethal twilight

broken by a single steeple, an abandoned
railway bridge spanning here and there, value

and use, the shape this city assumes

By assigning weighted adjectives such as "ruinous" and "meager" to the sun and moon rather than to people, Harmon keeps the poem's melancholy low-key. The way he juxtaposes the personal and immediate (hearing the furnace kick on) with big, sweeping, abstract thoughts is typical of his work, and helps the big thoughts go down. Because we are anchored in a definite moment, it becomes more possible to follow the speaker when he takes flight: "knowledge unbraids itself from freed // finitudes." But the final three stanzas are where the poem really gets exciting. The speaker has frittered his afternoon away until it's too late to accomplish anything. Who can't relate to his anomie? I've certainly had days I was my own worst enemy, knowing there was plenty I should do yet doing none of it. With the word "twilight" the speaker segues from his wasted afternoon to what he can see of the city through his

window: “an abandoned / railway bridge spanning here and there.” It’s a great visual on which to close and hauntingly apt, as if the outside world has come to reflect his inner reality.

Throughout *Le Spleen de Poughkeepsie* the speaker is recessive, a photographer who has no interest in making himself the subject of his pictures. We sense his presence behind the camera, but that’s all. One prose poem includes the line “A kick-ass attentiveness bunny- / hops the curb,” and if forced to sum up Harmon’s m.o., I’d say “kick-ass attentiveness” pretty much covers it. He overlooks nothing, notices everything, and by his recall makes even the tiniest details *worth* notice. Whether it’s the “razorwire, / and barbed hooks // of autumn-dried briars” on the fence of a meth clinic closed for the weekend or “fingertips // against wall-shadow, / girl smoking in the kitchen // with the dishwashing crew,” the sheer daily reality of Poughkeepsie commands our eye and attention.

Lastly, I should mention that not everything in the book is gloom. Ruin has its own perverse beauty, after all, or Pompeii wouldn’t fascinate us two thousand years later. When the speaker says,

...yes, dear twilight, I
like to be alone with
scents of sill-dust and gasoline
pump handles: a controlled
excess historically
received with the clank
and smudge of defunct
industry

I can relate to the appreciation—the affection, even—he feels for these dusty artifacts of a time now “defunct.” Half a lifetime after I’d lived in Philadelphia, I returned one hot July day with my husband and we searched for my old apartment. I was a little hazy on where exactly along Walnut it had been, and in the end we only found it because I recognized some stairs leading below street level. My building was so glammed up I would have walked by it. Gazing at the immaculate white stucco façade, it was hard to believe my past had ever existed. But when we descended the metal stairs, ah, here was a piece of the past I remembered. Down in the alley nothing had changed. The same graffiti on the walls, the same glittering tideline of vodka bottles.

Note: The editor of this magazine served as judge for the contest of which Harmon’s book was the winner. He had no role in selecting the book for consideration here.