

## Reviews

Each issue we will try to include reviews of books and chapbooks we have received—some we like more than others, but all are, in our estimation, interesting and worth reading. Look forward to the next issue when among those reviewed will be Wade Agnew's *A Desultory Way* and *Solace for a Starving, Naked, Alone in the Dark Soul*; Terri McCord's *In the Company of Animals* and *The Art and the Wait*; Dan Nowak's *Recycle Suburbia*; Victoria Brockmeier's *My Maiden Cowboy Names*; and Dan Albergotti's *The Boatloads*.

### Review of Paul Hostovsky's *Bending the Notes* (Main Street Rag, 2009, 108 pages, \$14, <http://www.mainstreetrag.com/> )

I'd like to tell you everything about Paul Hostovsky's new book of poems, *Bending the Notes*, but I can't; it's a large book, as books of poetry go, and covers a lot of ground: childhood, parenting, the world of the deaf, beauty, religion, and so on. I can, however, bend your ear towards some of the high notes.

My favorite part of the book comes early on. In fact, my favorite poem is the first one, "Coconut." Having seen that "Coconut" was recited by Garrison Keillor on *The Writer's Almanac*, I can't read it without hearing it in Keillor's distinctive, gently husky, painstakingly careful enunciations. And yet, that sort of reading works for this poem and for many of the poems in *Bending the Notes*. A number of the early poems in particular seem written from the voice of a speaker who is careful, calm, measured, and astutely observant of everyday miracles, such as "happiness" in "Coconut:"

Bear with me I  
want to tell you  
something about  
happiness  
it's hard to get at  
but the thing is  
I wasn't looking  
I was looking  
somewhere else  
when my son found it  
in the fruit section  
and came running  
holding it out  
in his small hands . . . .

This is the voice of the grown up you always want to be with your own children, the grown up who is patient and gentle and able to remember the sense of awe, appreciation and exuberance with which we experienced things as children. The miracle of this book is that Hostovsky's mastery of language is able to recreate again and again not only the child's awe at the world but also the adult's awe at the child. We

experience this in poems like “Little League,” where the speaker talks of his daughter marveling at the miracles of a baseball game:

when someone hits a long foul ball  
and everyone’s eyes are on it  
as it sails out of play . . .  
the ump has dipped his hand  
into his bottomless black pocket  
and conjured up a shiny new white one  
like a brand new coin  
from behind the catcher’s ear,  
which he then gives to the catcher  
who seems to contain his surprise  
though behind his mask his eyes are surely  
as wide with wonder as hers.

We see it again in “Conversations with My Son,” where the son asks, “Would you rather be buried or / crucified?” and, after his father’s deliberations, announces “I think I’d rather be crucified,” as he has

unbuckled his belt, unlocked the door  
and reappeared outside, running up the hill,  
his little backpack full of tools  
bouncing on his shoulders,  
a head on his shoulders full of questions,  
questions escaping all over.

Later poems will acknowledge the harsher, more difficult aspects of living in the world, but in these early poems, Hostovsky embraces the child’s view and entertains the possibilities that view engenders. The speaker of “At the Optometrist,” for example, recaptures a moment of childhood innocence as he sits in the examination chair:

. . . It’s all about  
which one I prefer here in the dark,  
with a place to rest my chin, me and the doc  
.....  
and so I just keep on focusing on  
which one I like best, while he focuses  
on making something out of it for me. I could  
do this all day long. It reminds me  
of childhood--what childhood ought to be:  
questions concerning your favorites,  
painless and gentle, someone tying your shoe  
while you sit in a chair thinking of other  
things. . . .

Similarly, the speaker of “Every American Child” imagines a world where childhood appreciation of beauty is never lost to the necessary business of the adult world:

. . . And every American child will  
be expected to learn by heart the history of the blues  
because the history of the blues is an American  
story, which some American grownups can't be trusted  
to tell, much less sing, to their American children.

Not every poem in the book, however, features such idealism or expresses such patience and calm. As the speakers and subjects of the poems age and the emotional realities become more complex, a different sort of poem emerges, one that is breathless and anxious, such as the prose poem “Deaf House” and “The Pigeons of Lynn,” which is full of complex sentences and relative clauses. This style of poem is repeated throughout the second half of the collection, but the possibilities it offers for expression and the penchant the poems have for humor and understated depth are perhaps most enjoyable in the brilliant poem, “Bicycles:”

It's like we're all bicycles  
and we all have these handlebars  
and some of the handlebars and some  
of the seats are incredibly beautiful  
not to mention the way the wheels spin  
and the bells ring  
and the reflectors reflect and we can't  
look at them and we can't stop looking at them  
and all we really want is to get on top of them  
and ride off into the sunset but they say  
hey I'm not a bicycle okay  
I have an eternal soul that you can't see  
because you're so focused on my handlebars

There is so much more offered by Hostovsky's poetry. It is, as I've said, a large book whose ultimate goal is to help us know what to do with life and love and beauty, to teach us how “to bend the notes.” And ultimately, in learning so much about life himself, Hostovsky reaches the point that every master does, the point where he realizes how little he knows. That knowledge is best expressed in the book's final metaphor in the poem “My Statement,” ostensibly about a flute:

. . . from the moment I lifted the thing,  
I couldn't put it down--wherever I tried  
to stash it or ditch it, it stuck out painfully  
  
like some herniated part of the body  
of beauty, the inner beauty of the world, secret and silver  
and singing out from the enclosure

of my desire for it. I couldn't keep it. I couldn't lose it.  
I couldn't even play it. So I gave it back and now

I only want to be believed.

**Review of *Bright Burning Fuse* by Melanie Faith (Etched Press, 2008, 18 pages, \$5, <http://www.etchedpress.com/titles.html> )**

What I like best about the poems in Melanie Faith's *Bright Burning Fuse* is their "downhomeyness." These are poems from the heartland, the poetic version of John Mellencamp songs or Billie Letts' novel *Where the Heart Is*. In the recent debate about Wall Street versus Main Street, these poems clearly side with Main Street, or perhaps somewhat off-Main Street. For me, it's a familiar world, albeit one that seems to be vanishing.

In each poem, Faith captures the ambience of late 20<sup>th</sup> century rural America using the only two tools available to the poet, language and imagery. In the opening poem, "Time Was," we are reminded that

Once it was the kind of world  
where a girl could travel around alone  
along any road with a backpack,  
a change of clothes, and a banjo.

In the rest of the poem we follow this girl we remember from the days of our childhood, or, if you're younger, from your parents' stories through an innocent pick-up, dinner with a stranger, sharing photographs, and arriving at a commune where growing plants leads to internal growth as well, and all with no sense of the danger we would feel in similar circumstances today. The colloquial title of the poem sets the right tone such that the reader is not at all surprised to find the only three-syllable words in the roughly 200-word poem are "grandfather," "seasonal," and ironically, "provincial."

"Time Was" is not the only colloquialism used as a title in the collection. My favorite, because I can remember my grandmother saying all the time, is "It Makes a Body Wonder," although my grandmother's statement was usually the dismayed "now don't that make a body wonder," usually followed by exactly 5 clucks of her headshaking, self-pitying, resolved tongue. Similarly, in this poem, the speaker remarks how the whistle of a distant train at 1 a.m. can make "a body itch to rise up and follow," but then quickly acknowledges "my people are not a runaway people. / We are nine to five at the dinner and thrift store, / we are PTA and tilling rows without complaint." Ultimately, the speaker tells us

Even when we go, we always find our way  
back to these woods and creeks,  
back to moonlight clinging to the clearing,  
back to a silently wondering, listening.

Which probably doesn't really sound so to most of us after all.

And so it goes in this collection, each poem presenting us compelling images of a world that is far from perfect, but still, in its predictability, its closeness among human beings and to the earth, and even its self-deprecating humor, remains appealing. In the same way, these poems are deceptive, seemingly simple at times but subtly conveying the truest and therefore most important internal human conflicts: ambition versus acceptance; familiarity versus possibility; comfort versus curiosity.

**Review of Timothy Geiger's *The Curse of Pheromones* (Main Street Rag, 2008, 63 pages, \$14, <http://www.mainstreetrag.com/> )**

*The Curse of Pheromones* by Timothy Geiger is simply a wonderfully enjoyable set of poems. The book consists of a scattering of painful narratives about personal tragedies set against a larger backdrop of poems about the inescapability of time, loss, and death, and the question of how one lives and what one believes given the knowledge of death. The poems offer timely and useful insight into these questions, sometimes with great gravity, sometimes with considerable levity. Most of the poems are short, accessible, and philosophical.

The poem, "Ambient," printed here in its entirety is typical of the poems in the collection, with its disarming clarity of description leading to a more disturbing and resonant reflection on our lack of knowledge regarding the source of the ambient light surrounding us.

#### Ambient

This close to the city  
the nearest star to the moon  
is a full head-turn to the left--  
ambient light  
makes even what's clear  
hard to see.  
Like the word to  
occurring in four  
of the first six lines  
of this poem--  
*to the city, to the moon,*  
*to the left, and to see--*  
it's not always how a thing operates  
so long as it looks,  
or sounds, good in action.  
A simple hole  
punched in a piece of cardboard  
is still the best way  
to view a total eclipse,  
as I learned  
in sixth-grade catechism class  
when Sister Ellen said  
"Always keep it simple  
in order to see God."  
But not even faith  
can help the invisible stars  
filling the sky  
with their utter lack of spectacle,  
fast asleep  
in the shadow

of so much light.

If “Ambient” can be said to be about keeping a proper humility and inquisitiveness as a human being, then “Gold-Star Coastal Tour Lines” is about how to survive given the danger of humility becoming diminishment and depression. In this poem we are reminded of Frost’s “Stopping by Woods” when we hear a speaker who wants “to leave / the humbug behind / and drift / into the light and almost holy sea.” Fortunately, for the speaker, before he is lost to the overwhelming presence of the sea, he hears “the Captain” say “find something close and hold it / like you would a lover. / If you go over / this is how to survive.”

The source of this drive to make meaning out of life is made clear in the occasional more personal poem, such as in “Apparitions,” a poem which may be the best, but is certainly the most emotionally intense in the book.

### Apparitions

He told me in whispers  
about the hobgoblins  
always rumbling under the bed.  
We were only seven years old.  
No one believed him but me.  
Twice a day they came

with a needle and scalpel.  
The bandage turned pink  
around the tube that drained  
his eyes. We shouldn’t have climbed  
the abandoned water tower--  
my best friend slipping on ice

into a rusty iron handrail,  
the new year turning  
its pockets inside-out.  
I may have misheard  
the word “hospital”  
and thought he said

“hobgoblins.” Is it just the dead  
or does every memory  
leave a ghost as well--  
clockwork eyes made of glass,  
my best friend blind  
by Valentine’s Day.

Such revelation of personally-felt tragedy is repeated in “Sleep,” where we read

In a field of Pennsylvania wheat

I watched my best friend  
begin to die. Cancer,  
he said, was hollowing his spine  
  
and his dreams  
had never been more vivid.

Again, in “Sacramento,” it is the personally tragic that leads to attempts at constructing meaning, permanence, or at least understanding: “I had lost the ability to believe. / Tragedy followed me like a burnt match, dead birds and thunder. / But for my do that needed to be fed, I’d given up altogether.”

My only complaint against *The Curse of Pheromones* is that the first poem, from my overgeneralized perspective that all poets are ultimately optimistic and Romantic (else why would they continue to write), should surely have been the last. Out of this gathering of existentially-grasping work, “Believe” gives the reader this all-important question: “why, after all this time listening, / are you still sitting there / when you’ve so much left to do?”

**Review of Brenda Graham's *How Sound Carries Over Water* (Main Street Rag, 2008, 59 pages, \$14, <http://www.mainstreetrag.com/>)**

I think Brenda Graham and I grew up in the same place, a place with a Red Dot Store, a mill village (or trailer park), disappointing fathers, and an empty swing singing "its uncoiled song" ("Any Other Man's Daughter Would Be Crying"), a place where everyone else's Daddy seemed kinder than the one who "makes me pick my own / switches from the hedge, stings my legs, [warning] *You'd better not whine.*"

The poems in Graham's first collection, *How Sound Carries Over Water*, are very familiar to me, and not just because this is the third book of poems I've read this year about growing up in an alcoholic and impoverished home in the South, nor just because that setting is similar to the one I was born into, but because Graham does the hard work of the poet. She goes back into memory to find the images that reveal the deeper truths about the places we live, and then she tries on word after word and phrase after phrase until she finds the one way those images can be recorded such that the reader is transported to the time, place, and reality she writes of.

The poems of *How Sound Carries Over Water* are mostly confessional and accessible. They are divided into three sections. The first section, "The Bones of Home," creates a sort of childhood family portrait, albeit a family portrait from hell. These poems show us a home characterized by "temper-cracked walls" ("Mitsy") where even the family dog, named *Good-for-Nothin' Bitch*, keeps returning to "colorless crosses / as if they were something worth coming back to." It's a home of disappointment, molestation, and ultimately, violence, as the reader sees in one of the collection's strongest poems, "Shame":

I want to be blind to the rocky yards  
I pick my way through on the way  
to our house, my sister's hand a bud in mine.  
Blind to the shattered glass

that haloes my mother's head, the way  
she lies, crumpled, at the bottom of the porch steps,  
my father at the top, hurling *goddamns*  
and empty whiskey bottles,

the neighbors in robes and slippers,  
pulled from sleep to see our family on display.

The second section of the book, "Dream within a Dream," tells the story of the speaker's inevitably doomed marriage, a marriage that begins with laughter in "Beds" as the couple fall through the middle of single beds they've "shackled" together with belts only to have their "thrashing" "loosen the knots." The poems in this section are remarkable for the subtly suggestive language. Even the apparently happiest poems are marked with words whose double-entendre suggest an inexorable falling apart, an inescapable silence. The speaker says in "The Vase"

Once upon a time, I tried  
to mend our conversations  
that heated up

like a glass blower's furnace.  
Soon enough, I learned to treat  
the melted, twisted stuff  
with a cold blast of silence.

The third section of the book, "A Backwards Sort of Rising," is aptly named as the poems in this section make clear the speaker's understanding of how the past haunts the present, and of the need to go back and deal with that past before "rising" will be possible. The section begins with the speaker in a dangerous place, contemplating self-harm in "Cardinal:" "I've had the urge myself, / wondering if I had what it took / to shatter my rippling image." But then she moves through "Recurring Dream"s of her father drunk and goes "Back to Avondale Drive" where "Thunder clouds of anger / / didn't gather in the corners, roll / from room to shadowed room" and even revisits her "grandfather's / fingers like gum erasers against your nipples" ("Fat") and finally begins to "see a bit of green worth saving" ("After the Hail Storm") and the possibility that "The Light in This House Is Changing."

In sum, while the poems in *How Sound Carries Over Water* tell the story of a fragile, uncertain success, their own success as poems is neither fragile nor uncertain. They are strong and worthy of being read.

**Review of Pat Riviere-Seel's *The Serial Killer's Daughter* (Main Street Rag, 2008, \$10, <http://www.mainstreetrag.com/>)**

What is it that keeps us reading books and watching Discovery Channel specials about Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, and Ted Kaczynski? Is it fear, some desire to protect ourselves from the dark potential of human nature by knowing more about it, or just a sense of fascination with what happens when the human mind goes awry?

We're all fascinated with the perverse, that turning from normalcy that marks all of our lives to some degree at one time or another. Pat Riviere-Seel, as a self-proclaimed "recovering journalist" might have a bit more of that fascination than most of us, however. So perhaps it is not surprising that the subject of her latest collection of poetry is the daughter of Velma Barfield, a grandmother who was executed at Central Prison in Raleigh, NC, in 1984, after being found guilty of committing multiple murders.

Knowing the background of Riviere-Seel's collection, *The Serial Killer's Daughter*, one might ask, why the daughter? Why not Barfield herself? That is the imaginative genius behind the book. After all, several books have been written about Velma Barfield, including one herself. What Riviere-Seel creates, however, is the imaginative story of a woman who discovers what for most of us would be beyond the realm of imagination, that one's own mother is a murderer, and in fact had played a role in the death of one's grandmother, and in all likelihood of one's father as well.

Perhaps to the disappointment of some readers, however, Riviere-Seel's collection is not a sensationalistic, tabloid-style rendering of gory details and pop psychology, but rather a sensitive treatment of the humanity that exists preceding, during, and following such extraordinary events. The poems begin by establishing the setting, Robeson County, NC, where "Baptist preachers seek salvation / from the shallows, but find little solace" and "Muscles ache from a day's labor / in the fields, textile mill or both," and where "Hate is no stranger" ("Robeson County").

Certainly such a setting of poverty, hard labor, spiritual restriction and frustration forms a fertile ground for internal and external conflicts. Such conflicts are made apparent in the poem "Prophecy," in which the daughter's father pronounces after an argument, "Ah, shug . . . /

That woman's gonna kill me." These setting poems are followed by poems that reveal the daughter's early intuitions, as in "A Second Look," where the daughter realizes, after leaving her father passed out on the bed, "Daddy wanted Winstons. / We stopped for ice cream. / She didn't buy him cigarettes." As the narrative continues, the reader discovers moments of greater conviction, as in "A Body Count," where the daughter reflects, "I know, Mama, / Someone has to stop you."

As engaging as the narrative of these poems is, it is not the story itself that absorbs the reader but the revelation of emotions the daughter experiences through the events. These range from desperate sympathy as she attempts to believe in the possibility of salvation in "Prey" to the inevitable shame as she encounters the outside world in "After My Mother is Arrested and Charged with Murder," and to a Frostian sort of existential determination in the closing lines of that poem (perhaps the strongest in the book):

Everyone wants to know  
what's going to happen next.  
I'll tell you: at the end of the day  
four small arms will circle my neck,  
I'll fry chicken, bake rolls, and pray  
to any god that will listen.

Words like riveting, spellbinding, and seductive are usually reserved for mystery or suspense novels not for poetry. But in this case, they all seem to apply as Pat Riviere-Seel examines the humanity behind the story of one of America's most notorious murder cases. The result is a collection that deserves to be read not only for its narrative but for its depth of emotion and poetic beauty as well.

**Review of Bill and Linda French Griffin's *Snake Den Ridge: a Bestiary* (March Street Press, 59 pages, \$15) <http://www.marchstreetpress.com/>**

Poetry doesn't sell. Everyone knows that. But Bill and Linda French Griffin have created a beautiful book of poems and sketches that is bound to buck that trend. "Beautiful" is not a word one finds in poetry much anymore. It's vague, overused, and ultimately so subjective as to be essentially meaningless. It remains, nonetheless, the first word that springs to mind when looking at the Griffins' *Snake Den Ridge: a Bestiary*. It is a beautiful book of beautiful poems with corresponding beautiful drawings.

Outside the realm of photography, calling a book a "coffee table book" is usually considered something of an insult. In this case, however, it is simply a description of how *Snake Den Ridge* can be used to add immediate aesthetic beauty, intellectual depth, and meditative calm to any living room or waiting room fortunate enough to have the book placed therein. In other words, because of the poems' unique combination of intellect and readability and the visual appeal of the sketches, *Snake Den Ridge* will make any room a more interesting place. How many contemporary books of poetry can make a claim such as that?

According to the book's preface, "A *bestiary* is a collection of stories about animals, plants, or other entities of the natural world." Such books have existed since at least the second century. The poems and sketches in this bestiary combine to present, in the words of the authors, "one week's experience on an Appalachian mountainside" and "join in celebration of a fabulist natural world, where creatures voice moral messages."

Glancing at the Table of Contents, the reader is naturally inclined towards the dramatic monologues from his or her favorite animals. In my case, I was sure my preference would be for "Hawk," "Bobcat," or "Junco," and I admit to great pleasure in hearing Hawk proclaim his discriminating tastes:

Oh yes, there's hunger,  
but not for Rabbit --  
I'm teaching you  
to feed the place  
you never knew you had.

Similarly, Bobcat's confession of discretion conjures a smile from one who has both heard, and much more rarely seen the bobcat but only heard tales of panthers in "these parts":

do you blame me if I choose  
to be invisible?  
Was it cousin Panther's choice  
to be exiled from the Ridge  
and extirpated?

Finally, for a 20-year bird-watching veteran, the confidence with which Junco (also known as a snowbird) speaks of eluding Hawk's dives while using his special intimacy with winter to survive "four seasons on the Ridge" brings a nod of recognition and appreciation.

In truth, however, none of these favorites created the most lasting impression upon me. That was achieved by the animals the author placed first and last in the collection, the animals who seem to squabble over actual ownership of this ridge: Raven and Bear. Raven opens the collection with a vital reminder of proper perspective, something most people lost before they were even born and never have the opportunity to regain:

I know from twenty circles  
of snowdeep and hungry moons  
and twenty circles of fresh shoots  
that Sky . . . Water . . . Earth . . .  
none of them are mine.

And I know none are yours."

Reading these lines one can't help but think of Frost's absent owner of the woods in his poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," but then Bear concludes the animal monologues with a clear and somewhat eerie refutation of Raven's claim for the absence of ownership:

Raven is mistaken -- this Ridge is mine.

And if you hear me, it will be the rising chest  
of the mountain and its timeless slow  
exhale,  
and if you hear me  
it will only be because  
I didn't hear you first.

And, finally, in the epilogue, Raven's words hint towards a different level of "ownership:

Don't sigh  
at my passing -- each morning  
and for every dawn to come  
I will spread my soul of wings  
where they cast no shadow  
and invite you to join me as part  
and presence  
of Snake Den Ridge.

Ultimately, these totemic poems reinvent the message many of us first heard in Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us," that the natural world is sacred,

invested with a divinity which is too often and too easily obscured by our obsession with ourselves as prime mover as well as by the “other-worldly” religions in which we have chosen to believe.