Book Reviews

"The First Thing and the Last" by Garth Greenwell

Collected Poems, by Jane Kenyon. Graywolf, 320 pp., $26

In 1994, Bill Moyers produced a documentary on Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon for PBS. Called *A Life Together*, it consists of interviews with the poets in their home, interspersed with footage of their public readings. The film, which won an Emmy for Moyers and a greatly expanded audience for Hall and Kenyon, seems in large part a study in contrasts: in conversation with Moyers, Hall is expansive, neighborly, eager to please, quick to expatiate on a question of technique or to illustrate his philosophies with country tales. Reading his poems he is a genial performer, gesturing freely, willing to interrupt himself to clarify a line or explain a reference. (These are all qualities that will serve him well in the laureateship to which he has recently been appointed.) Kenyon, on the other hand, is quiet, tentative, reticent; she almost always refuses to be drawn out, and reads her poems solemnly, nearly always sadly, seldom glancing up from the page. Their temperaments could hardly seem more different, and yet the film allows for no doubt of the sincerity or durability of their affection: watching his wife read her poems, Hall's face is radiant with pleasure; asked by Moyers to read "Pharaoh," a poem she wrote about Hall's cancer, Kenyon is audibly grieved. It is impossible, of course, to watch the film now without a sense of morbid irony: though Hall speaks of his illness and poor chance for survival, it was the then-healthy Kenyon who would die, within two years, of leukemia.

This is all worth dwelling on because the film is an important moment in the development of the aura that hangs around Kenyon's life and work. In the past ten years a kind of cottage industry has grown up around Kenyon; this has been spearheaded by her husband, whose most recent book, *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon*, is

a less moving account of the love and grief recorded in his powerful collection of poems, *Without*.[1] It has also produced, now, an academic conference, two critical collections—most recently *Simply Lasting*, edited by Kenyon's close friend Joyce Peseroff—a critical biography by John H. Timmerman, and a slim new volume by Hayden Carruth, *Letters to Jane*. Surely this is a remarkable lavishing of attention on a poet who published, in her lifetime, only four relatively small books, as well as translations of twenty Akhmatova poems. (Since her death Graywolf has also issued *A Hundred White Daffodils*, a collection of Kenyon's prose writings, which are often slight but on occasion breathtaking.) A cynical view of this attention might attribute it to the efforts of her husband, a prominent man of letters, and to her own place in the literary milieu of Cambridge, perhaps the closest thing we have in this country to a poetry capital; a more generous view would explain it simply by reference to the excellence of her poems. There is truth in both of these accounts. Kenyon is a poet of excellence, but the attention she receives, however loving, is seldom excellent: it obscures the sources of her strength and too often praises her failures. In Timmerman's biography, and in most of the essays in Peseroff's collection, Kenyon comes across as a poet so virtuous as to be prim, with only the slight, manageable wildness primness indulges as its foil. This is accurate enough of Kenyon's worst poems, which are also, surprisingly or not, her most popular poems. But at its best, for all its alluring reserve and quietness, for all its hopes of remedy and grace and modest, human happiness, Kenyon's work guards something irremediable at its heart.

I

By any measure, the distance traveled by Kenyon in her early career, the growth between her first and second books, is remarkable. Her debut, *From Room to Room*, appeared in 1978, three years after she and Donald Hall moved to Eagle Pond Farm; much of the book meditates

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1. In additon to the book under review, the following works are mentioned in this essay: Donald Hall, *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 272 pp.; Hall, *Without* (Mariner, 1999), 96 pp.; Joyce Peseroff, ed., *Simply Lasting* (Graywolf, 2005), 256 pp.; John H. Timmerman, *Jane Kenyon: A Literary Life* (William B. Eerdman's Publishing, 2002), 288 pp.; Hayden Carruth, *Letters to Jane* (Ausable, 2004), 120 pp.; Jane Kenyon, *A Hundred White Daffodils* (Graywolf, 2000), 226 pp.; Kenyon, *From Room to Room* (Alice James, 1978), 68 pp.; Kenyon, *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (Graywolf, 1986), 85 pp.; Kenyon, *Let Evening Come* (Graywolf, 1990), 80 pp.

on that move and documents the work of making a place among the presences and pressures of Hall's ancestral home. ("Gazing at us from parlor walls, / the gallery of ancestors must think we're *foolish*," she writes in "Changes.") The book suffers from the usual miscellaneous feel of first collections, the evidence of a young writer's search for a congenial style. (After her unsuccessful attempts here, Kenyon happily abandons the prose poem, publishing only one more during her career; similarly abandoned is surrealism after its single appearance in "Starting Therapy," with its "small brain / hovering over the porch.") Many of the poems have the feel of the workshop; they are polished to a perfect dullness.

More interesting, though, are failures that point to later strengths, techniques that will be indispensable to Kenyon's mature style. Several of these early poems are exercises in the kind of pure imagism whose popularity waxed and waned in the last century; here, in full, is "Changing Light":

> Clouds move over the mountain,
> methodical as ancient
> scholars.
>   Sun comes out
> in the high pasture where
> cows feel heat
> between their shoulder blades.

It may be hard to point to a defect in this poem, which is perfectly competent; it is also hard to care much about it. But Kenyon's early assays in imagism (Hall traces them to her early exposure to Witter Bynner's translations from the Chinese) will lead, after study at the schools of Akhmatova and, even more, Keats, to a mature faith in the image; Pound's dictum "the natural object is always the adequate symbol" would be her statement of that faith. Fidelity to the natural world provides Kenyon's most reliable source of aesthetic pleasure, and already in *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, her second book, her descriptions approach mastery. Here are the first two stanzas of "The Pond at Dusk":

> A fly wounds the water but the wound
> soon heals. Swallows tilt and twitter
> overhead, dropping now and then toward
> the outward-radiating evidence of food.

> The green haze on the trees changes
> into leaves, and what looks like smoke
> floating over the neighbor's barn
> is only apple blossoms.

The first stanza is a lovely nod to the last line of the Autumn ode, "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies." No other single poem is so important for Kenyon, and allusions to it are scattered throughout the collected volume; surely Hall's claim that "No one will find in her work clear fingerprints of Keats" is entirely mistaken.

A sign of Kenyon's growth as a poet is her increasing ability to encode her landscapes with affective significance; in "February: Thinking of Flowers," also from *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, she does this by means of a startling figure: "Now wind torments the field, / turning the white surface back / on itself, back and back on itself, / like an animal licking a wound." This facility for description will lead, by her final poems, to passages disarming in their gorgeousness: "…tender ferns unfurl / in the ditches, and this year's budding leaves / push last year's spectral leaves from the tips / of the twigs of the ash trees"; "Rain has fallen // all night, and the intimate / smells of wet earth press through / the screen. A sudden stir of air moves / the sere late summer leaves, sounding / for a moment like still more rain." These are lines that skirt the erotic in their sensuous pleasures, and the imagism that contributes to a sense of intellectual anemia in the early work, a fear of abstraction and philosophy, will become crucial to the expansive meditations Kenyon is capable of at her best.

If there are anomalous failures among these early works, and failures that point toward later strengths, there are also faults that will recur throughout the career, though seldom so baldly as here. Perhaps the worst poem in Kenyon's first collection is "At the Feeder." Clearly these early poems are as drunk on image as the mature work, but they nearly always put images to unsatisfying use: either, as in "Changing Light," leaving them to hover uninterpreted on the page, without a passable bridge to significance; or, as in these stanzas, and even more damagingly, interpreting them to triteness:

> First the Chickadees take
> their share, then fly
> to the bittersweet vine,

where they crack open the seeds,
excited, like poets
opening the day's mail.

And the Evening Grosbeaks—
those large and prosperous
finches—resemble skiers
with the latest equipment, bright
yellow goggles on their faces.

Now the Bluejay comes in
for a landing, like a SAC bomber
returning to Plattsburgh
after a day of patrolling the ozone.
Every teacup in the pantry rattles.

Unlike Kenyon's mature poetic, which is everywhere respectful of mystery, these lines confront the natural world without wonder; they don't deepen the world but simplify it, translating it to human terms that allow for an understanding as complete and untroubled as it is shallow. But the more damaging feature of the poem, and the fault whose temptation would prove intermittently irresistible for Kenyon, is the poem's charm, its ingratiating cleverness; one feels it aspiring to popularity, to the pleased shiftings and sighs of entertainment. The same empty pleasure is on offer in one of Kenyon's most popular poems, "The Shirt":

The shirt touches his neck
and smooths over his back.
It slides down his sides.
It even goes down below his belt—
down into his pants.
Lucky shirt.

Surely this is far less sensual, and less sexy, than the "intimate smells of wet earth" in the lines quoted above. The erotic is an important element of Kenyon's work, and one far too often slighted (as this review will slight it) in discussions thereof; but here the erotic is entirely domesticated, shorn of all threat or compulsion, translated to the merely naughty. To register Kenyon's mastery of the erotic poem, one must read "Siesta:

Barbados," "At the Summer Solstice," and, especially, "September Garden Party," a Cavafyan performance among the loveliest and most modest lyrics of our recent poetry:

> We sit with friends at the round
> glass table. The talk is clever;
> everyone rises to it. Bees
> come to the spiral pear peelings
> on your plate.
> From my lap or your hand
> the spice of our morning's privacy
> comes drifting up. Fall sun
> passes through the wine.

II

The increasing power of Kenyon's work over the career is not due just to greater mastery of image, form, genre (with her second book she begins to inhabit the elegiac mode that will provide her with some of her most successful poems); it is also enabled by the greater depth and certainty of her themes. Kenyon's mental illness, her lifelong struggle with depression, is an important part of her legend, which generally figures the trajectory of that struggle as one of simple endurance and triumph; but the poems, at their most compelling and strenuous, chart a less certain course of occasional despair and only fleeting, fragile victory. When the poems do attempt to achieve definite "recovery," they nearly always feel forced, their resolutions willed statements, not felt dramas. Kenyon was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of thirty-eight, just before the publication of *The Boat of Quiet Hours*; it is in that book that mental illness becomes an explicit subject of the poems. Consider "Depression in Winter":

> There comes a little space between the south
> side of a boulder
> and the snow that fills the woods around it.
> Sun heats the stone, reveals
> a crescent of bare ground: brown ferns,
> and tufts of needles like red hair,
> acorns, a patch of moss, bright green....
>
> I sank with every step up to my knees,
> throwing myself forward with a violence

> of effort, greedy for unhappiness—
> until by accident I found the stone,
> with its secret porch of heat and light,
> where something small could luxuriate, then
> turned back down my path, chastened and calm.

The poem is entirely successful until the final line. The opening, Frostian gesture ("There comes…") establishes nicely a tone that will support both the particular, empirical observation of the poem's beginning ("Sun heats the stone, reveals / a crescent of bare ground") and the allegorical use to which that observation will be put. The entrance of the self in the second stanza is compelling both in its pathos and in the distance it keeps from that pathos, the judgment and recrimination clear in "greedy for unhappiness." In the final lines, when this self encounters the scene prepared for it in the poem's first half, there is a beautiful sense of reprieve as the speaker approaches the "secret porch of heat and light, / where something small could luxuriate." (The final word here, in an environment so overwhelmingly monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon, constitutes its own luxury.) But the poem's literal and psychological turn is unconvincing, lacking motive or justification. Why turn away from the luxurious stone? What about the "secret porch of heat and light" chastens, what about it calms? The final line makes of the poem's experience, so forcefully and gracefully conveyed, a portable and unearned comfort.

A more satisfying poem is "After an Illness, Walking the Dog," from Kenyon's third collection, *Let Evening Come*. This, too, is a poem of recovery, but even as it celebrates health it does so in muted tones, recognizing health to be a precarious condition. Here is the first stanza:

> Wet things smell stronger,
> and I suppose his main regret is that
> he can sniff just one at a time.
> In a frenzy of delight
> he runs way up the sandy road—
> scored by freshets after five days
> of rain. Every pebble gleams, every leaf.

The dog is the poet's surrogate here; his delight in a world newly discovered is her own, and that delight is registered in the detail the poem records, the "freshets" in the sandy road, the gleaming particulars of pebble and leaf, the middle stanzas' "Queen Anne's lace / and goldenrod" and "open / and bright" road. These are the details of a world made vibrant again after dullness, and this vibrancy, which is one of the speaker's perception, is figured also in the landscape itself, bathed again in light after "five days / of rain." But consider now the poem's end:

> A sound commences in my left ear
> like the sound of the sea in a shell;
> a downward vertiginous drop comes with it.
> Time to head home. I wait
> until we're nearly out to the main road
> to put him back on the leash, and he
> —the designated optimist—
> imagines to the end that he is free.

The dog's instinctive delight is the delight of what is irrepressible in the self, but this final stanza makes clear how much that delight depends upon delusion. Torn from pleasure taken in the natural world by the sign of an impending relapse (figured beautifully in the way the dark confines of the shell contrast the "open / and bright road"), the speaker is as prone to an uncongenial reality as the dog who can't imagine himself as other than free until the snapping on of the leash.

"Having it Out with Melancholy," from *Let Evening Come*, is Kenyon's most extended meditation on mental illness; along with the same book's "The Stroller," and the posthumously published and remarkable unfinished poem, "Woman, Why Are You Weeping?," it points toward a new ambition in Kenyon's work, a desire to stretch the capacities of the lyric toward larger, more sprawling, less neatly ordered poems. ("I need to be working on a kind of frontier where I don't know myself what's going to happen next," Kenyon said in an interview. "I think I'm getting ready to write something that I don't know anything about yet… I find that I have more to say than I thought."[2]) As it traces the relationship between the self who speaks and the disease that oppresses

2. Mike Pride, "A Conversation with Jane Kenyon," in *Simply Lasting*: 106.

her, the poem takes on the shape of autobiography; in the candor with which it addresses the theme of madness, it might seem appropriate to consider it "confessional." Kenyon's admirers are quick to distance her from the dramatics of Plath or Sexton: "While Plath's poems can be overwrought, self-absorbed, and self-dramatizing," writes Laban Hill, "Kenyon's work contains a New England reserve that makes her poems much quieter and absent of histrionics."[3] Again, this emphasizes Kenyon's tameness, and narrows the compass of the poet who could write such Plathian lines as "Like a mad red brain / the involute rhubarb leaf / thinks its way up / through loam," or, in this poem, "A piece of burned meat / wears my clothes." It is after such extremity that the poem's close, with its moment—always provisional, always passing—of "ordinary contentment," can come with such emotional and aesthetic force. Here is the final section in full:

> High on Nardil and June light
> I wake at four,
> waiting greedily for the first
> notes of the wood thrush. Easeful air
> presses through the screen
> with the wild, complex song
> of the bird, and I am overcome
>
> by ordinary contentment.
> What hurt me so terribly
> all my life until this moment?
> How I love the small, swiftly
> beating heart of the bird
> singing in the great maples;
> its bright, unequivocal eye.

In its opening lines, this is a marvelous melding of the oldest resources of the tradition ("Sing cuccu nu, sing cuccu!") and our current "pharmaceutical wonders," as she calls them, privileging neither: "High on Nardil and June light." The poignancy of the stanza break may be difficult to register without the context provided by the rest of Kenyon's work; one of the pleasures of reading a collected volume is that a poet's characteristic moves, the techniques that, by repetition,

3. Hill, "Jane Kenyon," in *Simply Lasting*: 135.

become patterns, provide for the making of significance and aesthetic or affective effect when, as here, those patterns are broken. Kenyon's stanzas are habitually, sometimes almost obsessively, closed; she likes for them to be complete, autonomous units, logically and syntactically. When she does enjamb between stanzas, then, the effect is startling. Here, breaking at "overcome" provides us with the experience the word denotes, the breach of self-possession figured as a breach of poetic propriety; and it also gives a heartbreaking weight to the first line of the second stanza, where one lands on "ordinary contentment" after the disorientation of the break. The landing is all the more moving for the modesty of what is gained: not ecstasy, not the mystic union, recounted in the poem's fifth section, that is merely the reverse image of Kenyon's more usual depression ("Once, in my early thirties, I saw / that I was a speck of light in the great / river of light that undulates through time"), but "ordinary contentment." The poem's final lines, shifting from the song of the bird, perceived at a distance, to the shocking proximity of its "swiftly / beating heart," attended to despite its minuteness among the "great maples," present a vision of freedom from conflict that can only ever be projected, not experienced; an eye "unequivocal" can seldom be, however much she longs for it, a poet's eye.

III

Much has been made of Kenyon's physiological conception of depression, her modern understanding of the state as biochemical rather than moral. The most quoted of the nine sections of "Having it Out with Melancholy" is the second, and it supports this view, beginning with a litany of medicaments: "Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin, / Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax, / Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft." (For all these remedies, Kenyon lacks the modern comfort of hope for a cure, and the poem's crushing epigraph is taken from Chekhov: "If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure.") But ill at ease with a biological understanding of depression is the poem's figuring of "Melancholy" throughout as an addressable entity, a "thou" to be accused and recriminated. ("When I was born," the poem begins, "you waited / behind a pile of linen in the nursery, / and when we were alone, you lay down / on top of me, pressing / the bile of desolation into every pore.") Depression, for Kenyon, is finally more than a physiological condition; whatever the

causes of the disease, its effects are registered as much in the spirit as in the flesh: "You taught me to exist without gratitude. / You ruined my manners toward God." And the effect of Kenyon's illness on her work is not to be found merely in those poems that explicitly thematize depression; more profoundly, it can be seen in how it inflects the poet's relation to the self, which is nearly always one of alienation or reproach; the stance of these poems, in the theological dimension they frequently inhabit, is more often than not penitential.

This is to argue somewhat against the grain of most readings of the religious nature of Kenyon's work. These readings of Kenyon emphasize her "rhythms and images certain to comfort and inspirit," and they call on some of her most famous poems to make their case. Printed on the back of Kenyon's collected poems, in lieu of the usual praise, is the poem "Let Evening Come," which also features prominently in Moyers' film. Perhaps no poem so epitomizes the aspect of Kenyon's work that could lead Gregory Orr to claim, more than extravagantly, that Kenyon's "life, her work, and her legend have arrived at [the] power of healing, the way saints were imagined to be able to intercede for us." Kenyon herself hinted at a supernatural conception for the poem in an interview with Moyers:

> KENYON: That poem was given to me.
> MOYERS: By?
> KENYON: The muse, the Holy Ghost. I had written all the other poems in the book in which it appears, and I knew that it was a very sober book. I felt it needed something redeeming. I went upstairs one day with the purpose of writing something redeeming, which is not the way to write, but this just fell out. I really didn't have to struggle with it.

The poem enjoys, so far as I can tell, the universal sanction of Kenyon's readers. Here are the final three stanzas:

> Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
> Let the wind die down. Let the shed
> go black inside. Let evening come.
>
> To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
> in the oats, to air in the lung
> let evening come.

> Let it come, as it will, and don't
> be afraid. God does not leave us
> comfortless, so let evening come.

The problem with this is not just the absence of any human voice, the affectless inhabitation of a liturgical drone; or the strangely generic nature of the observations, which cuts Kenyon off from the description of particulars that is her greatest strength; or the lackluster language (the sentence immediately before these stanzas, "Let the stars appear / and the moon disclose her silver horn," is unique in Kenyon's work for its poetical triteness); or the facile dependence on refrain (an identical dependence structures "Otherwise," another beloved and bad poem); or the poem's bald appeal to the easiest kind of response, not different in kind from the low entertainment of a poem like "The Shirt"; or even its self-satisfaction, its refusal to acknowledge, as Kenyon's better poems everywhere acknowledge, the unassuageable fear of metaphysical dark which is constitutive of the human. The problem with this is that at the climax, when the poem's elements conjoin to perform the miraculous healing Orr imparts to them, the poet lies, and knows she is lying.

This is not a theological argument but a literary observation. Kenyon's biography is full of spiritual comfortlessness, and her early experience of religion was traumatic. She recounts this experience in an essay, "Childhood, While You Are In It." The "central psychic fact" of her childhood, she writes there, "was grandmother's spiritual obsession, and her effort to secure me in her religious fold." That effort was pursued primarily through fear: "The question for her was not do we love God, and our neighbors as ourselves, but have we obeyed, out of fear, his commandments." The pressures of this juridical religion served only to exile Kenyon from her religious heritage: "By the time I was in high school I grew contemptuous of religion and the people I knew who practiced it… I announced to my parents that one could not be a Christian and an intellectual, and that I would no longer attend church." It was only when she came, as Hall's wife, to Eagle Pond that she began again to attend church, and only slowly did she come into the deep, often conflicted faith of the mature poems. In her first collection, religion is present only as atmosphere: in a poem about her grandmother on her deathbed, the old woman is "pale / as Christ's hands on the wall above you"; in "Cages," a pair of monkeys reminds

her of sacred iconography: "And one lies in the lap of another. / They look like Mary and Jesus / in the Pietà, one searching for fleas / or lice on the other, for succour / on the body of the other …."

By *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, religion has become much more than decoration for Kenyon; it provides the standards and narratives by which to discipline and judge the self. Here is a short and beautiful poem from that volume, "Apple Dropping into Deep Early Snow":

> A jay settled on a branch, making it sway.
> The one shriveled fruit that remained
> gave way to the deepening drift below.
> I happened to see it the moment it fell.
>
> Dusk is eager and comes early. A car
> creeps over the hill. Still in the dark I try
> to tell if I am numbered with the damned,
> who cry, outraged, *Lord, when did we see You?*

This is a religion that bears more relation to the terrible faith of Kenyon's grandmother than to the complacency of "Let Evening Come." The pathos of the poem, its sudden shift to self-recrimination, remains a shock after multiple readings, as does the allegiance of the poem's final line, which leaves us in sympathy and communion with the crowds of the damned. The quotation is from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, when Christ separates the saved from the condemned, "as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats." It is a terrifying passage for the incomprehension with which his judgment is met: the question Kenyon places into the mouths of the damned here is in fact spoken by *both* groups in the Gospel account. That Kenyon reads herself into this narrative is clear from a poem that comes several pages earlier in *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, "Back from the City," where she condemns herself for basking in the aesthetic pleasures of sanctity without answering to the demands of faith:

> At the Cloisters I indulged in piety
> while gazing at a painted lindenwood Pietà—
> Mary holding her pierced and desiccated son
> across her knees; but when a man stepped close
> under the tasseled awning of the hotel,
> asking for "a quarter for someone
> down on his luck," I quickly turned my back.

This is the commonest hypocrisy, and easily forgiven; that Kenyon does not forgive herself easily is clear not only in the drama recalled by "Apple Dropping," but in the disgust registered here by the perfectly chosen verb "indulged." The easy comfort on offer in poems like "Let Evening Come," "Otherwise," or "Notes from the Other Side" (in which a warrantless missive from the frontier of heaven reassures us that "God, as promised, proves / to be mercy clothed in light") is corrected by poems that recognize the despair that must attend any attempt to live by the impossible demands of the narratives of Christ. There is, in such poems, surely a sense in which God leaves comfortless those who believe in him. "We Let the Boat Drift" offers a scene from the deathbed of Kenyon's father:

> Once we talked about the life to come.
> I took the Bible from the nightstand
> and offered John 14: "I go to prepare
> a place for you." "Fine. Good," he said.
> "But what about Matthew? 'You, therefore,
> must be perfect, as your heavenly Father
> is perfect.'" And he wept.

"God will need something to burn," writes Kenyon in "The Argument," "if the fire is to be unquenchable."

IV

I emphasize the terrible aspects of Kenyon's God in an attempt to correct what seems to me a misapprehension about the nature of her poems; but to present this as a full reading of her devotion would be to offer a caricature for a caricature. The brimstone that was Kenyon's inheritance from her grandmother must be set beside the joy she takes in the natural world, in love, in her hope for the possibility of human goodness. This proximity of joy and despair is figured beautifully in "Twilight: After Haying" (another poem steeped in Keats's "To Autumn"), which sometimes strikes me as Kenyon's loveliest poem: "These things happen…the soul's bliss / and suffering are bound together / like the grasses…" The succor she takes in the natural and human worlds, the poems at least sometimes allow, can be more compelling than the grand dramas and threats of theology. Here is one of Kenyon's last poems, "Man Eating":

> The man at the table across from mine
> is eating yogurt. His eyes, following
> the progress of the spoon, cross briefly
> each time it nears his face. Time,
>
> and the world with all its principalities,
> might come to an end as prophesied
> by the Apostle John, but what about
> this man, so completely present
>
> to the little carton with its cool,
> sweet food, which has caused no animal
> to suffer, and which he is eating
> with a pearl-white plastic spoon.

Modesty confronts grandeur in these lines, and exerts its own claims. This little poem, with its precise, sometimes comic detail ("His eyes…cross briefly") lovingly describing a man enjoying, as a kind of meditation, a sweetness free of offense, makes no metaphysical claims, provides nothing to refute eschatology, speaks in anything but absolutes; and yet it offers a comfort more authentic than any guarantee channeled from beyond the grave.

Kenyon's admirers often make extraordinary claims for her work; it is, says Gregory Orr, capable of something like miraculous healing; another essayist from *Simply Lasting* refers to Kenyon as "our Akhmatova." I sometimes cringe at these claims; they never compel my assent. Kenyon is a decidedly minor poet: her poems are limited in their forms, affects, and subjects; they do nothing to extend our literature beyond the bounds it knows; they make no attempt to swallow the world. But good minor poets ("something," as Eliot reminds us in *The Sacred Wood*, "which is very rare"), for all their limitations, may nonetheless be essential poets, essential to individuals if not to traditions, and after reading them one has a perpetual desire for their company. Kenyon is such a poet: her poems are not great; they are merely wonderful. They offer passages of moral force and incredible beauty, especially in their exact and moving descriptions of the natural world; the best two or three of them should have a permanent place in our literature. But the poems thus far enshrined in anthologies and critical articles are far from the best, emphasizing as they do the indulgence of metaphysical palliation

that is Kenyon's greatest fault. Kenyon's permanent contribution to the soul's accoutrement lies instead in those poems that chronicle a life lived in the service of an ideal, honest both in expressing the joy of that ideal's discernment and the despair of failing it. "Searching for God is the first thing and the last," she writes, "but in between such trouble, and such pain."

Rooms of His Mind
by Melora Wolff

High Water Mark: Prose Poems, by David Shumate. University of Pittsburgh, 80 pp., $12.95

I

David Shumate, winner of the 2004 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize from University of Pittsburgh Press, creates fabulist prose poems like quirky rooms, rearranging familiar furniture, sliding aside doors to reveal portraits askew, violent acts, old ghosts seeking new fates, dark cellars and airy spaces as spare and simple as prayer gardens. In his first published collection, *High Water Mark*, as in a house, some of these poetic rooms seem to be unfinished whimsies while others reveal a psyche rigorously exploring itself, loving its own conflicted interior designs, and establishing Shumate's authority, range and seriousness as a prose poet.

"The Psychic Geography of Atlantis," the prose poem that closes the second and strongest section of this five-part collection, illustrates the psychological complexity of Shumate's work. An opaque, clever "I" detects "footsteps descending into the cellars of [his] mind." A woman, a wife most likely, determines to "read" his thoughts by entering his brain, a practical technique taught her by an old Rumanian grandmother:

> … She begins rummaging through the cluttered shelves. She pauses to inspect a memory about an old girlfriend. Then dusts off images of when I was a world-class alcoholic. I'm not sure what she's looking for. But the intrusion offends me. So I begin remembering things that never actually occurred. Like the time I tied her to a railroad track and whistled my way back to town. Or the autumn evening we sneaked off to a cheap motel in Amarillo. She in her pink negligee. I in my cowboy boots. Or the time she drank so much she stripped and shinnied up the oak tree in her mother-in-law's backyard. When I think she's had enough, I clear my throat, and she looks up, disoriented. Like the sole survivor of a failed expedition to Atlantis. I smile and take her hand. The pack mules. The native guides. The captain and the entire crew. They're all drifting to the bottom of the sea.

The narrator's response to being entered and seen clarifies a central concern of Shumate's poems: the conflicts between tenderness and aggression, intimacy and power. As the narrator pummels the curious woman with artful lies and sexual clichés, he asserts his fantasy of control. Only after that fantasy is complete, his "cellars" defended, is he able to smile, to reach for her hand, and to advance, however ambiguously. The shifty "I" of "Atlantis" has forced the woman to fail in her exploration of his depths, yet by neatly evading her scrutiny, he has also failed to share himself. She—and we—are allowed only a glimpse of an old lover, and of a "world-class alcoholic." Of course we understand the sunken city to be the narrator's hidden self, or, to use a word Shumate repeats throughout *High Water Mark*, his *soul,* elusive, unfathomable, and perhaps un-salvageable. The city/soul is submerged, the poet's final tone sobering. Wonderfully, the poem seems to have pointed an accusatory finger at the poet, condemning his evasiveness. Most poets know the trope of the artful dodge quite well but Shumate makes it his subject, and his poetry's project, to employ and condemn the dodge. Through brief scenes and comic images that both withhold and betray, he achieves a genuine and despairing self-knowledge.

"Atlantis" is one of Shumate's richest poems about the predicament of emotional advance and retreat, domination and surrender. "The Japanese Rooms" is another more tonally passive poem on the subject of mind-entry, from the book's first section. In this poem, Shumate seems to set out on a dreamy tour, his psychic waters stirred, but not yet darkened. The man's and woman's roles are in reverse—*he* enters *her* mind—and she receives his intrusive presence neutrally. Their intimate sharing of personal space is complex, yet benign:

> Before I enter the Japanese rooms of her mind I bow to the servant
> and remove my shoes. I speak in whispers and slide one parchment
> door after another back until I cannot remember the way I came.
> I am offered a cushion to sit on and I wait in this room where she
> displays her most delicate things. Soon she approaches wearing a
> blue and white kimono and her hair pinned back. She is bearing
> something in her arms and as she nears I see it is the child she never
> had. She places a shy girl of two on a cushion across from me and
> offers us both some tea in the style of the old days. We listen to the
> distant lute. The waterfall. Perhaps we sit there for years, then finally
> we stand and bow to one another. She withdraws through the maze
> of white doors. . . .

We don't know who might have fathered the woman's unborn child, but the poet implicates himself through his mere presence, "the child turning to consider me one last time before she is borne away in the arms of the one who never was her mother." Together, "The Psychic Geography of Atlantis" and "The Japanese Rooms" balance the poet's subjects of force, violence, and failure with peace, respect, and responsibility. Confrontation and patience vie for personal as well as historical authority to define truth.

The people of these poems are tossed by metaphorical and literal storms, and they often misuse whatever power they may have. Several speakers, however, strive for sheer resilience and the power to forgive. Their efforts are observed by Buddhas, saints, "dark priests," "aboriginal figures," and ghosts of ancestors with "every reason to despise" them. Shumate has written a sequence of poems that clearly implies a longer, questing narrative, a layered project of making peace with the past, explored through the book's sections on history, spirit, body and family. Each poem asks in its own way, if we are merely *present* within time and space, are we most guilty of our actions, or of our failures to act? And will we sink or swim at the inevitable high water mark of our history and private trouble?

II

Many of Shumate's strongest poems succeed because they are fueled by his storytelling talent, by great sequences of eerie image, and by the presence of familiar historical or literary figures, re-imagined in fun and surprising ways. In *The Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse,* Stephen Fredman describes a particular delight American prose poets take in "inviting and examining the prose realms of fact and anecdote and reclaiming for poetry the right to investigate the domain of truth."[1] Michel Delville, author of *American Prose Poetry: The Boundaries of Poetic Genre*, points out, similarly, the fabulist prose poets' inclination to "defeat the reader's aesthetic and moral expectation" through *unconventional* tales.[2] Shumate does just this—seizes the facts, rattles them, grins at them, and reshapes them as an offering of new morality, or to heal

1. Fredman, *The Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1990): 1.

2. Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* (University Press of Florida, 1998): 134-35.

old wounds. In many of his poems he revises tragic or violent realities for better outcomes. And three of those revisionist poems actually stir release, if not relief, as Shumate considers how power might have been used, or turned to better ends.

"Hitler's Barber," the most memorable poem in the book, describes "how easily the barber could have leaned his weight into the stroke of his razor and severed the artery of the foul-smelling dictator." Seeing the barber as plagued by a troubled conscience or perhaps by his own eternal smallness, the speaker describes the lost opportunity:

> … For decades he had rehearsed the act that would have saved the lives of millions. The swift incision. The blood gushing forth. The Fuhrer's astonishment as their eyes met. The grasp of the bodyguards as they dragged him into the street and leaned him against the wall. His defiant smile before the bullets shattered his skull. How nice they would have looked, his monuments towering over so many European squares.…

Alas, the barber does not act, and we see two bloody scenes unfolding at once, the real genocide and the dreamed assassination. In "Coronado Rises in the Stirrups," on the other hand, Coronado "looks out over America and shakes his head and says fuck this and tugs at the reins of his horse and wheels it south again while all around him, silent in the grass, the breathless Indians exhale." The sentences of these poems have friction, a thrilling burn as we experience the instant in which fates might be altered, or when peace settles momentarily, transparently, over threat. In "A Nazi in Retirement," Shumate describes a plaza at dawn, murderers multiplying beneath the poem's blossoms:

> Once in a while he cannot sleep. Something he ate, perhaps. Or the moon. So he dresses in his white suit and goes down into the streets. He can walk for miles on nights like this. Only the sound of his heels on the stone.
>
> Sometime before dawn he comes to a plaza where the bougainvilleas and jacarandas bloom. He sits on a bench near a fountain, near the falling water. One by one the others come. They too find benches. They too listen as the trees awaken with birds. This is how the street sweepers find them. All sitting quietly in their white suits.

The quiet achievement of this poem is its rendering of fragrant pleasure, which we inhale along with a certain horror that we actually *want* to sit with these men greeting the awakening day. The banality of Shumate's settings—the barber's chair, the public bench—invites anyone, everyone, to come have a seat! As Geoff Dyer observes in *The Ongoing Moment*, both the barber chair and the bench have always had a seductive, threatening ordinariness as images, because in them, anything might happen, and "Everyone is always welcome, even when they're not."[3]

In some poems, Shumate does sit down as a character himself, alongside men whose destinies he dislikes. In "Custer," and "With Fitzgerald Along the Côte d'Azur," the poet is a manipulative witness, taking notes on weaknesses that reveal fatal shifts in the foundation of power and greatness. In these poems, the tone is elevated and self-righteous. "Custer" begins: "He is a hard one to write a poem about. Like Napoleon. Hannibal. Genghis Khan. Already so large in history. To do it right, I have to sit down with him." When prodded, Custer tells his tale at a favorite steak house, but the speaker tells us that "when he gets to the part about Sitting Bull, about Crazy Horse, he develops a twitch above his right eye, raises his finger for the waiter, excuses himself and goes to the restroom while I sit there along the bluffs with the entire Sioux nation, awaiting his return." Two poems later, Shumate follows F. Scott—that literary star of compulsive self-annihilation—and shares not steak but "cocktails at a corner of the balcony enjoying one of those perfect evenings only the rich can afford." While Fitzgerald dissolves into drink, the speaker dissolves into poetic reverie of the moment:

> … At times he seems fragile, on the brink of disappearing. We gaze out over the Mediterranean. The yachts swaying in the harbor. The lights flickering across the bay. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and drifts far from it all, imagining what it might be like if he were actually here.
>
> ("With Fitzgerald along the Côte d'Azur")

And in the book's first poem, "The Rain," Shumate goes beyond brushing shoulders with greatness; he imagines himself as a good, if uninspired, God: "Who knows? With a few small changes, things might

3. Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (Pantheon, 2005): 130.

have been different today. But the rain…The rain…Now that was truly inspired. I would never have thought of that. Not in a million years." Is this grandiosity or humility? Surely it is both, a duality we come to recognize as Shumate's signature.

Emotional destruction and willful falls from grace haunt these poems that depend upon fragmented sentences to convey a fractured all-too-human world. While the shape of a paragraph provides familiar visual unity, the fragments are shards within that deceptively stable form. As sentences crack and break, danger appears—Hemingway's pistol, Lorca's firing squad, the cold war's dreaded bombs, the critic's barb, Freud's libido, a lover's betrayal, double edged swords bringing relief and pain. And in "Shooting the Horse," the pistol is the poet's own:

> I unlatch the stall door, step inside, and stroke the silky neck of the old mare like a lover about to leave. I take an ear in hand, fold it over, and run my fingers across her muzzle. I coax her head up so I can blow into those nostrils. All part of the routine we taught each other long ago. I turn a half turn, pull a pistol from my coat, raise it to that long brow with the white blaze and place it between her sleepy eyes. I clear my throat. A sound much louder than it should be. I squeeze the trigger and the horse's feet fly out from under her as gravity gives way to a force even more austere, which we have named mercy.

This short tale loves, and needs, its clichés. The silky neck, sleepy eyes, and white blaze might feel "sentimental," in its contemporary derogatory meaning, but Shumate pulls his poem back into solemnity with a cleared throat of stark ardor that allows the poet a personal encounter with love and with the ambiguity of violent acts. In the more personal of Shumate's poems—those that depict domestic scenes—these shades of tenderness, righteousness, sentimentality and culpability work in chilling effect, as in "Armor." In that poem, innocence gazes uneasily upon experience. Shumate's small daughter studies suits of armor in a display case, and suspects her father of "concealing some dark secret," something he doesn't "think she's ready to know." She seems to read this truth in his silence: "Long ago armies of children fought the wars of adults. She turns and straps on the chain mail. The breastplate. She pulls the helmet over her head. A perfect fit. A squire helps her mount her horse. She pulls the sword from its sheath and lifts it into the air."

In Shumate's vision, no one—however small—escapes without armor; everyone must be ready to defend.

III

Shumate has earned a place in the literary company of prose poets like Russell Edson, Maxine Chernoff, and Julio Cortázar, each of them smitten with the possibilities of short tales, dreams, and variations on the fable. Shumate's collection may be closest to the spirit of Cortázar's *Cronopios and Famas*, with its alternating comic and meditative studies of ordinary objects, foibles, and frustrations.[4] More important, however, may be the poetry Shumate claims as his greatest influence—haiku and other Chinese and Japanese poems. He has said that Oriental forms of poetry first awakened his own poetic sensibility, and that the poems of *High Water Mark* are, for him, like "haiku novels." This statement draws our attention to Shumate's frugal language, its lack of abstraction, his frequent concern with the flawed philosophies born of history, and to the Buddhist notion that nature is not fallen, but is the only reliable source of solace. It's no surprise, really, to discover Shumate sitting for a brief moment beside a stream in the prose poem "The Immortal" with a mirage of Hokusai and Issa, the celebrated artist and poet of eighteenth/nineteenth century Japan. In fact, the tonal similarities are keen between Shumate's prose poems and Issa's comic and self-condemning haikus, like "All the time I pray to Buddha/I keep on/killing mosquitoes" or, "New Year's Day/everything is in blossom!/I feel about average." Both poets indulge the collision of high event with lower character, but their work shares solemn grief. Issa's anguished prose work "Journal of My Father's Last Year" resonates with Shumate's "Graveyard," in which he watches the ghost of his *own* dead father.[5] There are also interesting parallels between Shumate's work and some modern Japanese prose poems, like those of Inoue Yasushi, or Tanikawa Shuntaro, whose "haiku novels" are remarkably similar to Shumate's in their scenes of ecstatic and tragic experience, and in the friction they create in paragraphs, quickly and memorably, between images of destruction and creation. Here, for example, is a portion of Inoue's prose poem "The Pool":

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3. Cortázar, *Cronopios and Famas* (Pantheon, 1969).

4. Issa, "Journal of My Father's Last Year," trans. Robert Huey, *Monumenta Nipponica* 39:1 (1984): 34-54.

> Red flowers like blood bloom down the river side, and up in the hills the cicada [sic] sing like rain. And I was running in a place like that. Burned in the violent sun of early afternoon, all that was living was myself, and the grasshoppers scattering before me. The villagers, the villagers were dead, all in their separate houses, all fallen in the attitudes they'd chosen. So I was hurrying by the river to that pool, shaped like an inkwell among rocks and ferns, running to hurl myself within it.

And here is Shumate, in a portion of the title poem of *High Water Mark:*

> Cows and coffins floating through the streets. Prisoners carrying invalids from their rooms. The barkeeper consoling the preacher. A coon hound who showed up a month later forty miles downstream. And all that mud it left behind. You never forgot times like those. They become part of who you are. You describe them to your grandchildren. But they think it's just another tale in which animals talk and people live forever. I know it's not the kind of thing you ought to say… But I wouldn't mind seeing another good flood before I die. It's been dry for decades. Next time I think I'll just let go and drift downstream and see where I end up.[5]

Both poets move beyond the scenes of catastrophe, stirred to a deep sense of buoyancy and survival. They recognize the creative current within the possibility of extinction. Inoue's vision is apocryphal, and his desire to survive is fierce, passionate; Shumate's vision is appreciative, and his desire to survive is ruminative, sanguine. Inoue hurls himself, while Shumate drifts. Yet their healing waters have the same source. And this brings us to the poems in the third section of Shumate's collection—his quiet, Buddhist rooms—in which he explores the creative "machinery" of the soul.

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5. Inoue, "The Pool," trans. Dennis Keene, *The Modern Japanese Prose Poem: An Anthology of Six Poets* (Princeton, 1980): 161.

IV

The poems of the volume's third section are less compelling than those from the second section. These poems refract a longing for peace and an appreciation for the sacred aspect of objects. Perhaps inevitably, they lack the tension of those poems in the two earlier sections. Their tone is mainly clever, like that of a commercial. "Household Buddhas" begins as a list: "A thousand Buddhas populate this house. The Buddha of pepper. The Buddha of brooms. The chimney Buddha and the dustpan Buddha," and one feels that Shumate is seeking a drama, a good story, but he has only a foot in the door: "this should be enough to lead me to the end of the Great Path. If only I were ready." The same abortive listing occurs in "The Buddha of Arithmetic": "He spends eternity counting the contents of the universe. How many of these… How many of those…." The portraits of the saint for a "ragged soul," a "portly old friar" and of laborers working the "Machinery of the Soul" are vivid but the poems' contrivances and shifting focus keep us safely on the surface of an idea, just when the volume invites us to move more deeply, into the heart. This is the effect, as well, of most of the poems in the book's fourth section that address the body's desires, among them "Country Music," "Tabloid Headlines," and "The Id." It is less the case with the hilarious poem "Testicles," thanks to that poem's stream of inspired metaphors for horny obsession: "Lunatics rush through the corridors banging pots and pans. Screaming. Yanking each other's hair out… Chaos overtakes the city. The mayor leaps from his window. Nuns burn their habits and dive into the river." How wonderful to read a description as odd as that one and to think, yes, that's exactly how it is. That is one poem in which the light tone specifies rather than evades.

In many of these poems, the poet does appear again as a character, thank goodness, since Shumate's often grim presence unsettles the surface. There he is, a man ready to waste his days doing "nothing worthwhile"—he is not slaying dragons, not writing enough, often a "stupid son of a bitch." Shumate's tone, that of a man who lets himself and his good intentions down, saves those poems that tend, like the persona of *Atlantis,* to prefer detachment. Whenever Shumate goes after himself, critical or angry, the diction surges:

> It is like a day from the Dark Ages. Where people passed centuries walking in their sleep. Writhing with the plague. Even if I felt like writing a poem, a dark robed priest would incite a mob to hunt me

> down for the crime of inspiration. They would drag me into the square, tie me to a stake and toss a match on the faggot of wood at my feet.
>
> ("The Wasted Day")

These bursts of self contempt make the occasional fragility of his hope in other poems more moving:

> I close the drapes, sit in a chair, and let the air around me settle. When only silence remains, I reach into my chest and try to dislodge my soul. It is a delicate process that only seems to work when I forget what I am doing.
>
> ("The Machinery of the Soul")

V

When Shumate "forgets" what he is doing—or rather, when his cleverness recedes and the prose poems move beyond the surface of charm—his work does unsettle like a dislodged soul. And these delicate, indeed soulful, works comprise the book's last rooms, section five, and many of the single best poems of the collection. In them, the poet's family live restlessly, alongside his mistakes, and his father returns from the dead to guide him. Reading these final lyric and intimate poems about reunion and acceptance between humans separated from each other, one thinks immediately of all the mortal men with whom the poet has sat throughout the poems of *High Water Mark*, in steak houses and gardens, on balconies and on bluffs, rewriting, revising, improving pasts he wishes had been better. But in the poems "Visitation," "Graveyard" and "The Immortal"—even the more ambiguous "The Ambassador of the Dead"—Shumate is no longer the ambitious agent of change, scribbling new destinies. He is just a lost son, who listens as well as he can to the words and gestures of his dead father, a man himself transformed:

> He has lost that nervous edge. That tremor in his voice. As if we grow younger with each year of death. He senses something unsettled in me. That gnawing the dead know so well. He blows a smoke ring in the air and points his pipe in my direction. *Take up gardening* he says. *Become a shepherd. Or follow your way with words.* He

> reaches over and places his hand on my shoulder. Like the foot of a bird, it weighs nothing. But it is more than enough.
>
> ("Visitation")

The agitation percolating in all of the previous poems dissolves in Shumate's last pages. The sentence fragments no longer have a cutting edge, but the cadence of litanies, as he recounts his father's former loves: "Sitting behind the wheel of a Chevrolet. Feeling the sports page in his hands. Drinking a good beer. He knows he won't rest until he lets go." And the dead father himself is not a fragment of lost life either, as the other men of the previous poems have been, but is instead part of an ensemble of night beings gathering around Shumate, "one or two at a time, like train passengers who disembark at midnight" to inhabit "Poems That Can Only Be Written At Night" or to bloom, mushrooms disguised as gypsies. The gypsies vanish, but not without stirring in the speaker a new desire, a new addiction, to hope itself: "Their dank scent lingers. I develop a craving for them. I have heard that some are poisonous and others can set you free."

Through these last poems, *High Water Mark* does liberate the poet from poisons of the past. We, too, feel liberated, from the confining rooms of the living. We find ourselves with Shumate in the realm of the fabulous, thriving dead, where the concerns of this volume seem to be settled at last. *Where is the center of your life? Who, if anyone, will bring peace?* If we look into the dank, burgeoning darkness, Shumate seems to urge, we may find an ordinary father out there on the lawn again: "Tonight he wears his golf shirt. His baggy pants. His black and white saddle shoes. He walks up one row of headstones." Or we might find a familiar stranger, motioning for us to join him "along the bank without speaking." The final haiku novel ends quietly: "A crane flies over. Frogs sound off downstream. The moon finds a thousand places to recline. All night long … Two figures apart from time. From a distance we might even look like father and son." As we conclude *High Water Mark,* we arrive, satisfied, at the wider space beyond its mortal rooms—infinity—where history, power, vulnerability, and private pain resolve.